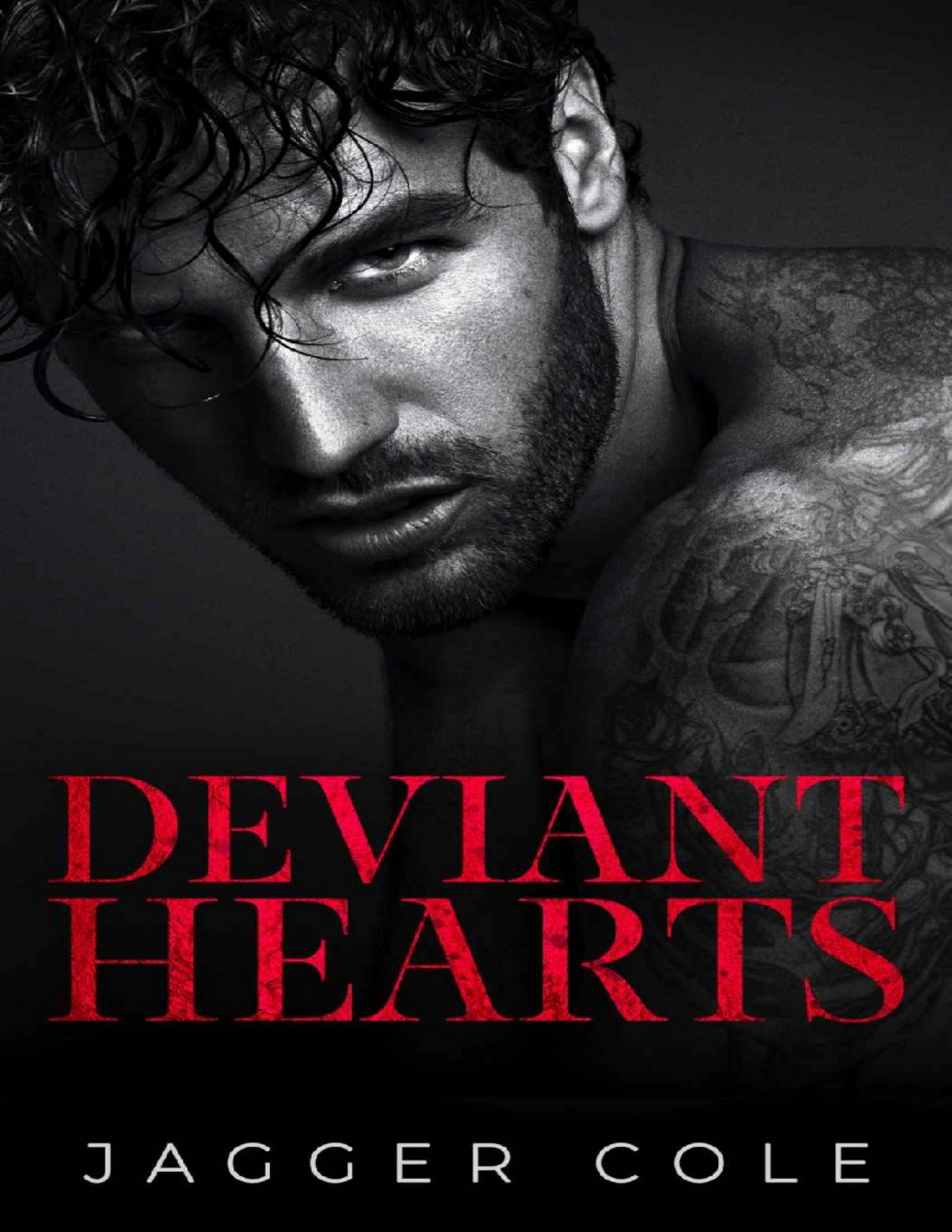
DEVIANT
HEARTS
JAGGER COLE

DEVIANT HEARTS

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A DARK ENEMIES-TO-LOVERS MAFIA ROMANCE

DARK HEARTS

BOOK ONE

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Desire - Meg Myers
For You - Serena Ryder
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45 - Bleachers

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TRIGGER WARNING

This book contains darker themes and graphic depictions of past trauma, as well as mentions of SA. While these scenes were written to create a more vivid, in-depth story, they may be triggering to some readers. Please read with that in mind.

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NEVE

FUCK. Me.

He's doing it.

Again.

I tell myself not to look. I tell myself to keep my eyes on the book and the study notes in front of me, because NYU seriously *does not care* what my last name is, and they'll have no issue failing my sorry ass from my government and public policy master's program if I don't focus.

I tell myself it's high time I bought some fucking curtains, so I can avoid this…*distraction.*…since it's clearly shaping up to be a frequent thing.

But the problem with telling yourself not to do something that deep down you *really* want to?

The "deep down" part always wins. *Always*.

Or, at least it does with me. Which might say more about me and my own self-control…or lack thereof.

No. It's definitely easier to go ahead and blame my new neighbor across the street. Let's go with that.

I mean, *he's* the one that keeps walking around naked in a penthouse made out of fucking *glass*.

Mark Twain once said, "There is a charm about the forbidden that makes it unspeakably desirable." But, smart as he was, it's clear Mr. Twain never had the neighbor I do. If he had, I'm pretty sure he'd have taken a whole lot of the whimsical "charm" out of that statement.

And sure enough, despite my best—or, okay, let's be real, *mediocre*—efforts, soon enough, my gaze shifts from the notes in front of me to the man across the steel canyon from me.

Sweet Jesus.

He's a freaking *god*. Tall and lean, and as muscled as a superhero. Shoulders and arms built to take away your ability to speak. Chiseled abs and those grooved hip-muscle things that I don't even know what they're called but they seem to be evolution's way of making even smart women go fucking stupid.

Tattoos for days. Deeply tanned, Mediterranean skin, with a shadow on his razor-sharp jaw, and dark, *perfectly* tousled hair.

It's like living next to a goddamn Avenger who models for Armani while he's not busy saving the world from Thanos. No wonder he seems to have a problem with wearing clothes.

Heat floods my cheeks as I glance across the chasm between us. The morning light streams right through his penthouse, which is another annoyance.

Two months ago, my place was a dream apartment. A modern, light-filled loft at the top of a thirty-eight-story building. So high up that I didn't even have neighbors who could see into this place.

Is it more than a little ostentatious? Well…*yeah*. It's a thousand square feet of modern glass and steel on the West Side overlooking the Hudson. Was it absurdly expensive? Also, yeah. But there's gotta be *some* perks that come with being a Kildare to offset the downsides.

Issues making friends my entire life because my family is the Irish Mafia? Check. Problems having any sort of romantic relationships, for the same reason? Check and double check.

Aimless, drifting, utterly unsure of what I want to do with my life, because what exactly *do* mafia princesses do all day?

Check and fucking mate.

For the last year, I've been throwing myself into this government and policy master's program at NYU. But after that? Who knows. For now, I'm at least finally living on my own.

But life still sort of feels just like something I'm drifting through.

Truth be told, I was pretty sure my uncle Cillian was going to shut down my plans of finally moving out of the main family house and into this place. Especially with all the violence and upheaval in the last few months as the fighting between the Irish Kildare and Greek Drakos families escalated to world-war-three levels.

But my dream apartment and the building itself are incredibly secure and easy to defend. Especially when there's a rotating crew of four Kildare guys constantly guarding the lobby—much, I'm sure, to the chagrin of the other tenants.

Yet that whole "dream apartment" thing quickly lost some of its luster when they completed construction on the building across the street, next to mine. The building with the double-height glass penthouse that rises two floors

above my thirty-eighth-floor apartment, that now blocks part of my view of the river.

His glass penthouse.

The man with the god-like body and the aversion to clothing. The man with the sensual tattoos and the swarthy, lean look of a Trojan warrior.

The man I have absolutely *no* business gawking at and thinking these sort of sinful thoughts about. Not just because it makes me a spying creep. But because he's a man I should have every reason in the world to hate.

He's not just my neighbor.

He's the *enemy*.

But try telling that to my under-satisfied libido and clenched thighs.

At last he moves from where he's been standing at the windows staring out at the Hudson with a cup of coffee in his hand and, mercifully, disappears from view.

Finally.

Distraction gone, I manage to pull my attention back to the study notes in front of me. Nina Simone croons over the sound system as I lose myself in the books. But a handful of minutes later, movement at my peripheral vision drags my eyes back up again. He's back. And wonder of wonders, he's dressed—in an impeccably-tailored dark suit. I yank my eyes back to my notes, then back to him.

This time, he's finally gone.

I exhale slowly, swallowing as I drag my attention back to my government policy books. I don't have time for these distractions. Not when I've got two weeks of notes to memorize and *also* a Kildare family meeting in…

I glance at my phone and groan.

Shit. In, basically, now. As if on cue, the buzzer goes off for my front door. Sighing, I close the books and pad across the living room. I glance through the peephole out of habit. Then I grin and open the door wide.

Eilish's brows furrow as she looks me up and down.

"Neve, what the fuck. We're going to be late, and you're not even dressed?"

My brow scrunches as I glance down at myself.

"You need to get *dressed*, Neve," my younger sister sighs.

"I'm dressed!"

"Those look like pajamas."

"So? They're comfy." I raise my gaze past her to the tall guy standing behind her. "Cas, back me up here."

But Castle just shakes his sandy blonde head and lifts a muscled shoulder apologetically.

"Cillian wants you dressed properly, kid."

I roll my eyes at the word kid, but I let it go. Castle's been Eilish's and my —I suppose the word is "bodyguard"—for the last ten years. Growing up, all of our friends drooled over the six-and-a-half-foot tall, built-like-a-quarterback shadow that was always with us. That, or they were *sure* one of us was going to get scandalously tangled up in some steamy, x-rated tryst with him.

But, *no way*. No way to an "eww" degree. Yes, Castle is ridiculously handsome. But to Eilish and me he's always been the older brother we

never had. And we're the perpetually annoying-but-loveable kid sisters *he* never had.

Which is why he can still get away with calling me "kid" or doing annoying big brother-type shit like messing up my hair even though I'm twenty-four.

I stick my bottom lip out, giving Castle my best puppy-dog eyes.

"But *Caaaastle*—"

"Enough with the waif eyes. Go get changed, Neve," he grunts. "Your uncle isn't exactly one to mince words, and he wants you dressed up."

"But *why*? What's this meeting even about?"

Eilish shrugs. "Beats me. Bet it has something to do with your new neighbor, though."

Annoyed as I am to be forced to give up my sweatpants and hoodie, I know Castle well enough to know there's no way he's budging on this. And I know my Uncle Cillian well enough to know that one, there's no wiggle room here, but more importantly two, there's a reason he wants us looking sharp. Even if I have no idea what that reason is.

I root around in my disaster zone of a bedroom, stripping out of my hoodie and sweats and pulling on clean underwear and clothes. Five minutes later, I emerge in a green puff-sleeve top, black jeans, and heeled black boots, shoving my long red hair up in a loose ponytail.

Eilish, predictably, rolls her eyes.

"*That's* dressed up?"

"I could go back to my extensive sweatpants collection, if you prefer."

Eilish sighs, reaching up to smooth the single errant lock of blonde back behind her ear. She's right. I'm still fairly casually dressed. Especially next to my princess of a little sister, who looks like a modern-day blonde Jackie-O in a pink Chanel jersey dress and heels, her hair and makeup immaculate. At *nine-thirty in the freaking morning*, no less. So sue me, this is the best I can do.

Finally, she grins as she rolls her eyes again.

"Okay, *okay*, fine. C'mon. We shouldn't be late."

"Hey, I'm not the one getting bent out of shape about the dress code."

I glance to Castle for at least a chuckle. But he's looking even more grim and stoic than usual.

"What's up with you?"

He shrugs, turning away.

"Just don't want to be late. C'mon."

I frown. "Cas, seriously, what's up?"

There's a glint in his eye when he glances back at me for half a second. But still, he gives nothing away.

"Let's get where we need to go, kid," he murmurs quietly.

I shoot Eilish a puzzled look as we follow him out the door. But she just shakes her head and gives me an "I have no idea" face. Given that my sister is incapable of being anything but cheerful, talking shit about *anyone* no matter how terrible they are, or lying in any capacity, it's clear she's also in the dark.

Twenty minutes later, Castle is pulling the white armored Range Rover up to the curb outside O'Bannon's. The midtown Irish pub has been our uncle's temporary center of business and war room since he moved to New York from London a few months ago, after the petty scuffles between the Kildare family and the Drakos family turned into all-out war.

After things went nuclear, when the Drakos family lost Vasilis, their head of operations in New York, and we lost Declan, the head of ours.

Declan, as in, *my father*.

The side door to O'Bannon's, which leads up to the second floor where Cillian's been holding court the last few months, is guarded by four Kildare men with not-so-hidden bulges of sidearms under their dark jackets. One nods stiffly at Castle and goes to open the door to the bar for us, when suddenly there's the sound of a car screeching to a stop at the curb behind us.

The hairs on the back of my neck start to prickle as I slowly turn to frown at the black Escalade. And when the back door opens, and a man in a dark suit with pure malice on his face steps out, my heart leaps into my throat.

"*RUN*!" I scream as I grab Eilish's arm, whirling to bolt into O'Bannon's before the bullets start flying.

Because I know damn well who the man who just stepped out of the SUV is. Hades Drakos: a dangerous, certifiable psychopath and second-in-command of the Drakos family. Basically, public enemy number two if your last name is Kildare.

As I yank my sister towards the door, I realize something odd: the guards aren't launching into action. Castle himself is just standing there, glowering at the second-oldest Drakos brother as he grins savagely at me.

“Cas?” I hiss hoarsely, my pulse thudding. Clearly, Eilish is just as out of the loop as I am, because she’s still cowering behind me, shaking.

“It’s okay, kid,” Castle mutters quietly. He glances behind me, his look softening as it frequently does when it comes to Eilish. Which is totally understandable. I’m the sister with a chip on her shoulder and an axe to grind. Eilish is the sweet one. The one who’s arguably *way* too soft for this dangerous world that we live in.

“But that’s—!”

“*Boo,*” Hades chuckles thinly, winking at me in a way that sends a shiver up my spine. He rolls his muscled shoulders, the tattoo ink that curls up from inside the collar of his dress shirt rippling as he buttons his jacket.

“Well, Pillow Fort. Can we go inside now?”

The creases in Castle’s brow deepen as he squares off with Hades.

“It’s Castle.”

“I really don’t give a shit. Are we doing this or not?”

I frown as I turn to Castle again.

“Doing *what*, Cas? What are we—”

“Open the doors.”

I stiffen at the deep, powerful voice that rumbles behind me. A voice that causes a tingling sensation to creep over my skin, electrifying me as deeply as it scares me. The feeling grows and throbs deeper and warmer, until I can feel my cheeks reddening as something wicked pools between my thighs.

I turn, and my core clenches tight.

It’s *him*.

My neighbor. The forbidden distraction. The man with the god-like body built for sin who I have no business fantasizing about, but God help me I do.

Because my neighbor isn't just eye candy.

He's *Ares fucking Drakos*, the brand-new king of the entire Drakos family.

I'm vaguely aware of more people getting out of a second and a third SUV that pull up behind the first—the other siblings in the Drakos family, and various other guards. As the seconds tick by, and as Ares' piercing, dark-eyed gaze continues to stab right into me, the question of why he's here fades into the background.

And the question of why he's looking at me like he's trying to figure out how to swallow me in one bite comes to the fore.

"Inside, all of you," he growls quietly, his voice filled with unquestioned power. Two of his three brothers—Hades and Kratos—and his sister Calliope glance at me with slightly raised eyebrows as they file past me into O'Bannon's. Their guards and the Kildare men follow.

Castle clears his throat, taking Eilish by the shoulders as if to escort her inside. I know I should go too. But somehow, I'm stuck. It's as if my gaze is bound to Ares. Or as if *his* gaze has me pinned to the very pavement beneath my feet.

We're on a busy New York sidewalk. And yet, it's as if we're suddenly in a bubble of silence. As if the entire rest of the world fades away to a low hum, until I can actually hear my throat tightening when he starts to walk towards me.

I shiver when he stops right in front of me, looming over me. I want to sneer at him. Or spit on his fancy shoes. Or worse. But all I can do is purse

my lips and glare at him.

Ares smirks down into my eyes.

“They haven’t told you yet, have they?”

I swallow.

“Told me *what*?”

One of his dark brows raises in amusement.

“Never mind. You’ll find out soon enough. You know who I am?”

“Of course I know who you are.”

“I mean, apart from being your neighbor.”

I stiffen, desperately trying to swallow back the heat from my face.

“Neighbor?” My voice cracks. Not badly, but enough. “I hadn’t realized.”

The dangerous and lethally-attractive man looming over me smiles ruthlessly, coldly.

“You don’t recognize me?”

“I—I guess not.”

“Would it help if I took my clothes off?”

Dear. GOD.

My face turns as hot as the sun as I pray for a sinkhole to open at my feet.

“I—I—”

“The meeting is about to start.”

He lets his lips curl slightly, giving me the faintest flash of white teeth. Then, without blinking, he starts to move past where I'm still glued to the sidewalk.

He pauses right next to me, and my breath sucks in as he leans down, so close I can smell the woodsy, elegant scent of his cologne and feel the heat of his breath in my ear.

"Oh, and Neve…" he growls quietly. "Peach isn't your color."

My brows knit as I start to turn towards him in confusion.

"I'm not wearing—"

Oh God.

Yes, I am.

My mind flashes back to rooting around in my light-filled bedroom as I yanked off my hoodie and sweatpants. Where I pulled out the green top and black jeans…

After putting on the laundry-day pair of peach-colored panties.

I'm not the only person spying on their neighbor.

Son of a bitch.

Ares clears his throat, straightening up and buttoning his jacket as I melt into a puddle of mortification.

"See you in there, princess."

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ARES

UNEASY LIES the head that wears the crown.

Everyone knows that. Except kings usually know they're going to *be* kings long before they take over the throne. They prepare for it their whole lives, train for it. They're ready when the day arrives.

I wasn't. Because I was never *meant* to be king. I'm Lancelot, burning and pillaging and fucking his way through the countryside. *Not* King fucking Arthur.

But life, or fate, or karma, or whatever you want to call it, had other plans for me.

Nine months ago, my father Aeneas, the head of the entire Drakos Family, died at the hands of my older brother, Atlas. My father was a hard, brutal man. But Atlas was unhinged. And power-hungry.

Not to mention a knuckle-dragging fucking idiot.

His "reign" lasted less than three weeks. Then he was killed waging a pointless war against a man with deep pockets and dangerous friends, all over a woman.

It’s an absurd story. Years and years ago, Atlas had once been betrothed to this woman’s mother, Saoirse —an Irish Mafia princess and Cillian Kildare’s sister. But Saoirse ended up having a fling with someone else, producing a daughter, Rose—who went on to end up with this man with the deep pockets and dangerous friends.

Atlas decided the daughter of the bride he’d been cheated out of should be his. Obviously, the man with whom she lived and shared a bed disagreed. And when the dust had settled, my brother was dead, and I was king in his place.

Sometimes I’m convinced life really is a Greek tragedy.

Or a comedy, depending on how cynical you are.

But, heavy as the burden to lead is, I was born for this. All my siblings and I were. Living under our father’s rule may have been a lesson in brutality and viciousness, but it hardened us. It prepared us to lead and to conquer. When I took the throne that was unexpectedly thrust upon me, I was ready.

And then, of course, life threw me another curveball.

My siblings and I were all born here in New York. But my father ultimately preferred England, where he’d grown up. So that’s where the real seat of the Drakos empire was for the last twelve years, while my uncle Vasilis oversaw our operations back here in New York City.

Until four months ago, when, as I say, the proverbial shit hit the proverbial fan.

Our family and the Irish Kildare family have never gotten along. There’s generations of bad blood between us, going back who even remembers how long. At one point, there was at least a half-truce—when Saoirse was

promised to Atlas. And even when that marriage fell through, things at least cooled off between our families for the next twenty years or so.

Until things went sideways, *badly*.

I've heard it started as a potential peace agreement. Vasilis sat down with Declan Kildare, Cillian's half-brother and the head of Kildare operations here in New York. But whatever "peace" they were trying to hammer out shattered when a gunfight broke out between them, killing them both.

It should mean all-out war. A bloodbath in the streets. The final showdown between the Kildare and Drakos families until only one is left standing.

Luckily, neither Cillian nor I is suicidal.

Cillian *is* a fucking psychopath, there's no question about that. He's been described more than once as the kind of man who wants to watch the world burn because he enjoys the smell of the smoke. And I think that's a fair assessment. But either out self-interest or greed, we've managed to work out an arrangement.

It's time to settle this bullshit between our families once and for all.

And the key to settling it is currently glaring daggers at me from across the room. Clearly, nobody's told her yet. But she's it.

We're it.

My eyes narrow, my mouth tightening to a line as I let my gaze drag across the scowl on Neve Kildare's face.

It makes sense that she hates me. Even if neither of us had anything to do with the violence of a few months ago, at the end of the day, my uncle and her father killed each other. From what I gather, neither she nor her sister Eilish was very close with Declan.

But still. Blood is blood.

And soon, *we'll* be blood.

Joined.

Bound together forever.

My jaw grinds as my mind flashes to other more literal ways I could bind the stunning and furious-looking redhead across the table from me.

My tempting, sinfully attractive neighbor who *really* ought to have some curtains put up in her bedroom.

The one who's been spying on me. The one *I've* been spying on right back. I'm just much better at it than she is.

Desire makes my cock swell as my mind flashes back to earlier today. When I was standing in my kitchen rinsing out my coffee cup, staring through the windows above my sink…

Into her *bedroom*. Where I watched her strip off her sweatpants and hoodie and prowl naked around her disaster of a room until she found some other clothes to pull on—

"You realize she's going to bite your dick off the first chance she gets, right?"

My jaw grinds and my train of thought is interrupted as I glance sideways at my younger brother, Hades, sitting next to me on our side of the conference table.

When we were kids, I used to roll my eyes at the way our father named all of us after Greek gods, titans, and muses—Atlas, Ares, Hades, Deimos, Kratos, and our sister, Calliope. But as we've gotten older, we've all

weirdly grown into the mythological figures we were named for. Hades especially.

There's a darkness and an edge in all of us—our father made damn sure of that with his heavy hand and strict discipline. But Hades—named for the god of the dead, the king of the underworld—always seems to revel in it. The sadistically sociopathic glint I can currently see in his eyes is a testament to that darkness.

He shrugs at my cold silence.

"You know I'm right."

"What I know is this is neither the time nor the place, Hades," I grunt back.

My brother shrugs again, pushing his longish hair back from his face. He got our mother's piercing ice-blue eyes. I got our father's dark, brooding ones.

Behind him and towering above all of us despite being younger than Hades and me, Kratos mimics my stern glare at our brother.

"It's a good arrangement," he rumbles in that mountainous way of his.

I nod to my brother. Kratos is a good, steady voice of reason. Though Deimos, who's holding down the fort back in London, is the true peacekeeper of all of us siblings.

A peacekeeper in the style of a nuclear deterrent, that is, not Gandhi.

"Oh, I agree," Hades smiles brittly. "It's good for peace and will bring an end to bloodshed. I mean, it's not *my* cock that's going to get chewed off."

"Could you *attempt* to not be a dick for just two minutes, Hades?"

I turn to smirk quietly at Calliope, my sharp-tongued little sister, sitting on my other side. The youngest and smallest of all of us, and yet somehow, she's the law-keeper. She's got our grandmother Dimitra's genes.

Across the room, the group of Kildare men who've been talking quietly amongst themselves finally come find seats at the table. Cillian and I catch each other's eyes, and we nod.

This wasn't his idea, or mine. It was Dimitra who first put it forward: a way to put the hostilities between our families and our subsidiaries behind us for good. As she pointed out, the closest we've ever gotten to peace before was when Atlas was set to marry Saoirse.

What better way to settle our differences than by becoming family?

But when I glance at Neve sitting across the table, still glaring pure malice at me, it's clear her uncle still hasn't told her what's about to happen.

This should be interesting.

Cillian clears his throat, sitting back in his seat as his green eyes slice across the room, silencing it with a look.

"I'm not one for fancy speeches, so I'll get straight to it. We're here because the hostilities between our organizations have reached an untenable level. Rivalries are one thing. But we've crossed too many lines, and there's too much blood in the streets."

He pulls a silver cigarette case out of his breast pocket, opens it, slips one between his lips, and lights it deftly with a flick of a silver Zippo. Smoke curls around the Irishman's head as his glinting green eyes pierce through it.

"I'm not going to get all weepy and sentimental. The truth is, the reason all of us are here is that war will mean ruin to both the Kildare and Drakos families. It will destroy our business interests. And there are already enough

jackals circling, waiting for the first sign of weakness to strike. The Bolinaro Cartel. The Carveli Family. The Reznikov Bratva, not to mention their allies."

Cillian's icy gaze lands on me.

I don't blink.

"So in the interest of *not* getting hit from behind by an enemy while we bicker like schoolboys, Ares and I have come to an arrangement—one that will end these hostilities forever, and make both of our families stronger than ever as a united front."

I watch Neve's face scrunch up in confusion as she turns to frown at her uncle.

Oh, this is about to get good.

"A *united* front?"

Goddamnit, Ezio.

I frown quietly as I lean forward, turning to stab my gaze down the length of the table to where Ezio Adamos is glaring daggers at Cillian.

"Please, *go on* about this fucking *united* front we're supposed to have with __"

"Ezio."

My voice is neither raised nor very forceful. But it cuts through the room all the same, quickly silencing him. He stares at me, fury and pain boiling behind his eyes.

The Adamos family is a subsidiary, tributary family to ours. Their allegiance has been pledged to the Drakos family for generations, and the

way I can see Ezio about to suicide bomb this entire discussion has my jaw grinding harshly.

But I get it. And I feel for him.

Ezio's only son, Jason, was at the meeting where Vasilis Drakos and Declan Kildare opened fire.

He was also killed.

"Ares, *please*," he hisses at me, pain glinting in his eyes. "You cannot seriously be considering allying ourselves with these backstabbing, honorless *Micks*—"

"*Be silent*," I snap.

I'm not completely heartless. I understand he's in pain. But this is decidedly *not* the place for it. Or the time for him to start hurling slurs.

Cillian clears his throat, eying Ezio across the table.

"What would…*ease* your grief?"

Fuck.

This isn't Cillian being diplomatic.

This is him going for the throat, and Ezio's about to walk right into his trap.

"What would *ease my fucking grief*?!" He snaps at the Irishman.

"I don't believe I stuttered, Mr. Adamos. What's the going rate on grief these days? Ten thousand? Twenty?"

Goddammit.

Ezio lurches to his feet, his face a mask of seething rage as he whips his head around to glare at me.

“This is insulting! I will *not* sit here—”

“Yes, you will.” My gaze hardens on him.

I’ll tell him again how sorry I am for his loss later. Not here.

“You. *Will*.”

His mouth thins to a line as he points a finger across the table at Cillian.

“This piece of shit *dares* to offer me *money*?! I lost a SON, Ares!”

“And I lost a fucking *brother*,” Cillian snaps coldly. “But here we are. And you can either get on board, or go find a nice length of rope somewhere and join your boy.”

Yeah, they’re not exaggerating when the call Cillian a sadistic sociopath.

The room goes silent. Ezio’s face turns purple. He looks like he’s seriously considering jumping across the table and murdering Cillian with his bare hands. But instead, he spins on his heel, glares at me viciously, and storms from the room.

“*Well, I have to say. This is TWICE as much fun as I imagined it would be,*” Hades mutters next to me.

Cillian sighs, drumming his fingers on the table as his gaze drags back to me.

“You need to keep your dogs on a tighter leash.”

“He’ll keep to the truce,” I growl back.

My eyes swivel to Neve again, drinking in her fiery red hair, the dusting of freckles across her nose, and the sharp green eyes so like her uncle’s, still squinting in confusion.

“And you?” I murmur, pulling my gaze from Neve to Cillian. “You’ll keep to our agreement?”

He takes a long, slow drag of his cigarette, and then nods slowly.

“We will.”

He turns to his niece, and my eyes lock onto her as well.

“Neve,” Cillian sighs. “There’s no easy way to say this. And if there was any other way…” he shrugs. “But there isn’t. Not one that doesn’t end in more blood.”

Her brow furrows deeper.

“Uncle, what are you talking about? And why am I—”

“You’re going to marry Ares Drakos, Neve. That will be the final truce to forever end this bullshit between our families.”

The room goes *silent*. Neve’s face turns white as she stares dumbfounded at her uncle. She blinks, frowning as if willing him to laugh at the spectacular joke he’s just made.

But this is no joke.

This is happening. And as reluctant and unhappy as *I* am about it, I’m guessing from the look of horror that spreads across her face that she’s twice as reluctant and unhappy.

“*What*?!”

Cillian takes one last pull from his smoke, exhaling toward the ceiling before dropping the butt in the mug of coffee in front of him.

“It’s the only way, Neve. You’re going to marry Ares, and that’s final.”

She blinks, shaking as her mouth forms silent words, none getting out.

“No—”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a discussion, Neve,” he says quietly, a flicker of regret and rare-for-Cillian apology on his face.

“Like hell it’s—!”

“*Neve*,” he growls thickly. “It’s. Been. Decided.”

Slowly, her face pale as a ghost, Neve turns to let her fierce green eyes stab into mine like knives.

I stare right back.

My little peeping Tom of a neighbor.

My enemy.

My wife.

“I think you’ll find, Neve, this is the best way to settle all of the bad blood __”

“And I think *you’ll* find yourself, *Ares*, with a knife in your throat if you come anywhere fucking near me.”

She stands abruptly, her eyes wild with fear and anger.

“Neve,” Cillian hisses quietly. “It’s *done*—”

“Oh, we’re done, all right.”

Without another word, she whirls, storms to the conference room doors, and blows right through them.

Shit.

“So,” Hades sighs, his voice dripping with amusement. “You ready to discuss body armor for you dick yet, or do you wanna talk bachelor party?”

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NEVE

“DID YOU KNOW?!”

There’s murder in my eyes and fury in my voice as I charge across the closed pub downstairs to where Castle and Eilish are sitting at the bar.

My sister turns in her seat, staring at my rage and my tears in confused shock. From Castle’s hardened, grim look, I already have my fucking answer.

“You *knew*!??” I scream at him, jabbing a harsh finger against his granite chest.

“Neve, listen to me—”

“Oh *fuck off*!” I snap. “You asshole! You fucking *knew* and you didn’t tell me!? How could you!?”

Eilish slips off her stool, moving between us.

“Whoa, hang on.” She turns to Castle. “What did you know?”

“That Cillian has me all set to marry *Ares fucking Drakos*!”

Eilish’s face goes pale as she spins to face me.

“*What*?!”

“Yes, she’s going to marry Ares,” Castle growls quietly.

My little sister turns back to gawk at him.

“You knew?”

He sighs, shoving a hand through his short hair, unable to look at me.

“Oh, he knew all right. He led me right into the lion’s den,” I hiss.

“Neve, c’mon!” He whirls back, glaring at me, arms spread wide in appeal. “You’re acting like I’m the mastermind strategist behind the whole operation. I’m just the hired muscle, kid.”

That’s bullshit and we both know it. Castle *is* the muscle, sure, but any lunkhead with a gym fetish could’ve been our bodyguard. Castle got picked for the job ten years ago not just because he’s big, or because of his background as an Army Ranger, but because he’s *very* smart, tactical, and always six steps ahead.

“You *knew*,” I hiss, accusation dripping from my lips.

Castle sighs heavily.

“Yeah, kid, I knew.”

“Fuck you. And stop calling me kid. I’m about to be a married woman, or haven’t you heard?”

“What was I gonna do, Neve?” he snaps. “Kidnap you to fucking Mexico or something?”

“You could’ve dropped me out of a plane over *Antarctica* and it would be better than being married into the fucking *Drakos family*!” I scream at him.

Eilish turns, her face white.

“You…you *really* are?”

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“She really is,” Castle says quietly. “It’s a deal your uncle and Ares have hammered out to bury the hatchet between the two families forever.”

“It’s fucking *medieval*, is what it is!” I hiss.

His eyes narrow. “You think I don’t agree with you?”

“I think you’re a fucking Judas, that’s what I think,” I spit, shoving past him behind the bar. I grab a bottle of whiskey and pour a splash into a rocks glass. My hand shakes, my nerves jangling like mad as I bring it to my lips.

“Neve, c’mon,” Castle looks at me uncertainly. “It’s ten in the morning—”

“Oh, go play with your thirty pieces of silver, *asshole*.”

I take the bottle and the glass with me, stomping back around to their side of the bar and climbing onto a stool.

“Neve…” Eilish says quietly, her voice choked as she lays a hand on my arm. “What are you going to do?”

“Run away.” I spit. “Kill Cillian. I don’t know.”

Castle clears his throat. “Look, I’m not on board with this—”

“Oh, *so good* to know. Fuck you.”

I’m being way harsher to Castle than I should. But right now, it’s either yell at him, who bought me here today knowing what I was walking into and didn’t say shit, or my equally left-out-of-the-loop sister. Between the two of them, damn straight it’s going to be Castle who catches my wrath right now.

“I’m *not* on board with it,” he repeats. “But you have to understand why Cillian played this card. It changes everything. It erases the hostilities between the families and all of the subsidiary families. It turns Drakos and Kildare into a superpower. Neve, I know you’re not blind to the politics of this world. You know there’s rumblings from the Cartel, the Bratva… waiting for the Irish and the Greeks to tear each other to shreds so they could come in and divide up the spoils.”

I do know all of this.

It still doesn’t do a thing to calm my racing heart or quiet the fury surging in my chest.

Castle sighs as he plops down on the stool next to me and drops a heavy hand to my shoulder.

“I’m sorry, kid. I really am. I’m not saying I like it, but the reality is the oldest Kildare daughter marrying the oldest Drakos son cleans the whole slate. Marriage is law in this world, you *know* that. That’s why Cillian went for this.”

“It’s the twenty-first fucking century, and we’re in New York,” I spit. “*He* can fucking marry Ares.”

Castle smirks quietly, shaking his head. I exhale as all the fight leaves me, and dread begins to fill the empty space that remains.

Fuck.

Fucking fuckity-*FUCK*.

Ares. I’m marrying *Ares*.

The god of fucking war himself.

The one with the god-like body molded out of sin and temptation, you mean.

I flush, quickly slugging back a heavy swallow of whiskey to try and burn the traitorous, lustful thought from my head. But that just brings on *other* filthy thoughts involving Ares and his divine physique. His chiseled jaw and perfect cheekbones. His piercing dark eyes, dark hair, flashing white teeth and tanned skin.

Not to mention his CGI abs. And his perfect ass. And his hip grooves and his….

I flush violently, draining the last of my glass before I reach for the bottle again.

“Easy.”

Castle pushes it outside my reach. I turn to glare at him.

“Gimme.”

He shakes his head. “I know you don’t like this. But it’s done.”

I feel Eilish sink into the stool on the other side of me and put her arms around me.

“Neve…”

“It’s fine,” I mutter coldly.

“It’s *not*,” Castle grunts. “Not really. It fucking stinks. For what it’s worth, you better be damn sure I’ll be watching for Ares to fuck up even once. He talks out of line to you, or lays a single fucking *finger* on you, and he’ll pay for it in blood.”

“A for effort, Cas. But I’m still mad at you,” I pout.

He flashes a crooked grin at me as I turn to punch him in the arm.

There’s a pause. Then—

“I mean…” Eilish frowns. “How real does it have to be?”

I shake my head. “Huh?”

“Like, maybe it’s just a marriage on paper, you know? You can still live at your place, or…” she looks at me hopefully. “Back at home? And you can still go to class and have your own life. Maybe it’s just a figurehead thing?”

“I have no idea,” I mumble, dropping my forehead into my hands, my elbows on the bar. I turn to glare at Castle. “Although I suppose *you* do.”

He shakes his head. “I don’t.”

“Big help you are.”

He smiles wryly.

“Let’s get you home.”

“*Or*, better idea,” Eilish prods. “We go back to the house—”

She means the main Kildare house, where she, Cillian, and Castle live.

“—and disappear into a pile of cheesy movies and junk food?”

I glower at my empty glass.

“And booze?”

She grins. “Sure.”

Castle drapes a hand on my shoulder. “I’ll get one of the guys to head into Brooklyn and pick you up some Lucali’s pizza.”

I glare at him. “You understand bribing me with my favorite pizza in the whole world is admitting your guilt, right?”

He shrugs. I groan.

This is a nightmare. But inside, my core is tightening.

My pulse is quickening

And dark, depraved thoughts are slinking and prowling around the edges of my mind.

It beyond sucks that I'm marrying Ares Drakos. But if I forget who he is, and I forget the fact that we're enemies….

I flush.

I mean, *look* at the man. It could be worse. I could be marrying Ezio Adamos or someone like that. I shudder as I shove my hands though my hair.

"Well?" Eilish prods hopefully. "What do you think?"

I glare at her. "You promise there'll be booze?"

She nods wryly.

"*Fine*, let's go." I turn to glare at Castle. "You're still on the hook for that Lucali's pizza, don't forget. And I want an extra side of those anchovies they have. The ones from Sicily."

He chuckles quietly. "I'll get right on it."

And *I'll* get right on figuring out how to torpedo this whole thing. Because as sinfully hot as Ares may be, and as much as the depraved idea of sharing a bed with him makes me shamefully aroused, *no way*.

I'm *not* marrying that man as part of some mafia business arrangement. I don't care what it takes. I'll find another way. Something with diplomacy, or money, or *anything*.

I'm not marrying Ares.

Castle sticks the bottle back behind the bar, and the three of us head out to the Range Rover, me dragging my feet.

I don’t see the car until it’s too late.

I don’t hear the screech of tires or the pop-popping sound of guns with silencers blasting through the windows of the passing SUV until there’s no chance of diving for cover or running away.

It’s like I’m in a nightmare, or trying to run underwater. I revolve in slow motion, horror turning my face ashen as I watch red bloom across Castle’s chest through his white dress shirt.

As I watch him drop like a stone to the sidewalk.

As I turn and feel my heart shatter into a million pieces when I see the blood staining the front of Eilish’s Chanel dress, just before her eyes roll back in her head and she collapses to the pavement.

And then, over the low rumble of the New York City traffic, all I can hear is my own voice.

Screaming.

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ARES

I STEP OUTSIDE of the Irish pub into a blur of chaos.

I'm dimly aware of automatically dropping down for cover and yanking my gun out of my jacket as the black SUV roars past, gun-muzzles flashing fire through the rolled-down windows.

But then I do something else. Something curious that surprises me.

The bullets are still flying when I hurdle over the flowerbed I've been crouched behind. I can feel them pinging off the pavement by my feet and the brick wall behind me as I bolt across the sidewalk and tackle Neve to the ground.

She screams and thrashes, but I don't fucking budge. I don't ease up, covering her body with my own as the windows of the white Range Rover next to us explode into tinted black hail.

Then I'm up, surging to my feet with a snarl on my lips, bringing my gun up and squeezing off a few rounds at the black SUV as it roars away.

I memorize the license plate just before it screeches around a corner.

It's only then that I'm aware of the screaming.

I whip around, and something hardens and goes cold inside of me when for a second, seeing Neve collapse to the ground, I think she's been hit. But then I quickly realize it's not her.

It's her fucking *sister*.

The bodyguard, Castle, is down, too. Well, he can wait.

"Get your fucking hands off of her—!"

"*Move*," I snarl at Neve, as I drop to my knees next to Eilish. My hands run over her sides and across her midsection where the blood is seeping into her dress.

"Don't fucking touch—"

"I'm looking for entry wounds!" I bark at Neve. "Not copping a fucking *feel*! Jesus!"

Her mouth snaps shut as the volume and intensity of my voice drags her out of her terror. I whirl back to her sister, frowning as my fingers trace over the blood.

Where the *fuck* are the bullet holes—

Neve and I both jump when Eilish suddenly gasps for air, bolting upright with terror in her eyes.

"NEVE!!" Eilish screams as her sister sobs with relief, wrapping her arms around her.

The blood isn't hers.

Neve and I both realize it at the same second. Because we suddenly look to where Castle is slumped to the ground.

Fuck.

"YOU'RE ABSOLUTELY SURE?"

My tone is lethal.

Kratos nods grimly.

"Had my guy at the NYPD run the plate. It's definitely one of his."

His as in that moron Ezio. The drive-by that sprayed bullets at Neve, Eilish, and Castle, that very easily could have thrown this entire thing spiraling into all-out war, was *Ezio*.

I'm going to fucking kill him.

Hades, Kratos, and I are holed up in a spare conference room at Mount Sinai West—the closest hospital to O'Bannon's. The three of us, together with Cillian and a few of his men, rushed a wounded Castle, a shaken Eilish, and a near-catatonic Neve here an hour ago.

But everyone's okay. Well, mostly.

The blood on Eilish was Castle's. But even so, he's going to be fine. The guy was smart enough to be wearing a bulletproof vest under his shirt, which caught most of the shots that got sprayed his way. He's got a few bruised ribs, and wounds on his arm, shoulder, and hip that had to be stitched up where he got grazed—that's where the blood on Eilish came from.

But as much as it pains me to say it, the Kildare's top lieutenant and bodyguard is one tough son of a bitch. He's going to be fine. So is Eilish, who's only being treated for the bruise on her ass that she got when she fainted.

Castle’s okay. Eilish is okay.

Neve, on the other hand…

I feel a throb of something confusing surge through my veins as I think of the thousand other outcomes there could have been today.

It could have, and would have, destroyed the peace agreement Cillian and I hammered out if his niece had been gunned down—by the head of one of *my* supposed goddamn allies, at that. Jesus.

But she’s okay. She’s unhurt.

I can’t say the same will be true for Ezio when I get my hands on him.

“What the fuck was he thinking?” Kratos mutters, pacing the floor by the windows.

Hades swears under his breath. “He’s pissed that his son was killed by those dirty fucking Micks—”

Then he stops short, his eyes darting to the doorway behind me. I turn to see Cillian standing there, leaning against the doorframe, letting a cool, eerie green look linger on my brother.

“No, please, you were saying?”

Hades smiles sadistically.

“I was saying Ezio is more than a little upset that you *dirty fucking Micks* killed his son.”

The room feels tense as fuck for a second or two. I’m waiting for that weird, psycho smile on Cillian’s face to drop away, and for him to make a sudden rush at my brother. But it never happens. He just keeps smiling like that.

We might be brokering a truce and entering into a partnership here. But that doesn't mean I'm not still leery of the green-eyed Irishman and his reputation for being *well* past unhinged.

Cillian lets that smile of his bore right into Hades, until my brother scowls and shifts uncomfortably. Cillian says nothing. But he finally lets go of Hades with his eyes, swiveling his gaze to me instead.

"I don't actually give a flying fuck about your man's emotional state. But you do understand that he's a dead man, yes?"

My jaw clenches, but I nod.

Because I do understand that, even if I don't like it. Ezio's a good man, and the Adamos family served my uncle well for years. If Ezio's killed—worse, if he's killed by the Kildares and I *allow it to happen*—we're going to have a whole other issue on our hands.

And it's one we'll have to tackle. Or rather, one *I'll* have to fucking tackle.

Hail to the Chief.

Cillian's not wrong though. This has to happen. Ezio has to be taken out. He shot at Cillian's fucking *blood*, for fuck's sake.

"It'll be handled."

Hades glares at me. I glare right back.

"*Prépei na symveí. To katalavaínoume kai oi dýo*," I mutter at him in Greek.

It has to happen. We both understand that.

His face darkens as he looks away. But then slowly, he nods and glances back at me.

"Nai, enochlíste. Katalavaíno."

Yes, brother. I understand.

Cillian eyes me. “You’ve got exactly one hour to round him up and bring him to me. Or else I burn this fucking city to the ground until I find him.”

My mouth thins.

“Let’s be clear about one thing. We’re in agreement here. But we’re entering an equal *partnership*.”

I step closer to Cillian, not blinking even when he fixes me with that psycho dead-eyed look of his.

“You do *not* give me orders or ultimatums. Is that understood?”

He says nothing for a few seconds. Finally, his lips curl at the corners as he raises a brow.

“You can unwad your panties, God of War,” he mutters. “We understand each other. But I need that man found, and I need him found *now*. I hope you can appreciate the urgency.”

“I can. And you’ll have him as soon as I find—”

“Ares.”

I glance at Kratos to see him nodding through the glass wall that forms the far side of the conference room. On the other side of it, a white-faced but tight-jawed man stands with his head held high, flanked by two of my men.

Ezio.

“My my, such prompt door-to-door delivery, I’m impressed,” Cillian murmurs viciously. I turn, frowning when I see him pulling a switchblade out of his jacket.

“*Easy*.”

“Oh, I’ll go easy. And slow.”

Hades and I glance at each other incredulously, and he gives me a “what the fuck” look.

“We’re in a hospital, Cillian…” I mutter.

“Yes, I’m well aware of that. But we’re only in a hospital because that motherfucker standing right there put my two nieces in it, if you’ll recall. Not to mention one of my best men. Which is why I’m going to cut his skin off.”

The door to the conference room opens, and one of my guys sticks his head in.

“Mr. Drakos, Ezio would like a word. He came to us on his own, by the way.”

I nod, then glance around.

We need to be somewhere that isn’t full of fucking windows.

“Find us a room with some more privacy,” I growl at the guard before he nods and ducks back out the door. I turn to Cillian. “And you. Enough with the Silence of the Lambs shit until we figure this out.”

I see the viciousness surge behind his eyes.

“*Please,*” I add.

Cillian rakes his teeth over his lip, thinking. “Fine. But I’m bringing my knife.”

“YOU HAVE MY FUCKING *WORD*, ARES.”

Five minutes later, we're in the hospital's chapel, with my men outside it guarding the doors. Ezio looks like he's about to piss himself as he eyes the causal way that Cillian is flipping the switchblade around in his hands with the practiced skill of a surgeon.

Or a butcher.

Ezio's just gotten through telling us how three of his men acted outside of his authority to try to take out Neve, as well as any other Kildares they could.

"You have to understand, they're angry, Ares. Jason was…" He chokes as he looks away. "He was much loved by my men, and they reacted very poorly to the news of the truce. They feel it's betraying his memory."

He clears his throat nervously as he turns to Cillian.

"I don't hold my son's death against you personally, Mr. Kildare. And as a show of good faith, though it does pain me, the three men responsible for today are tied up in a van downstairs. They're yours to do with as you wish."

I glance at Cillian.

"We good?"

He lifts a brow, eyeing Ezio cooly before turning to me.

"That depends. Do you believe him?"

"I do."

I really do. I've known Ezio Adamos a long, long time. And while I understand that he and his men are angry about what happened to Jason, he's not stupid enough to start tossing bullets around in the middle of fucking midtown Manhattan at ten in the morning.

Cillian lifts a shoulder. “Then yes, we’re good.”

Ezio smiles weakly and approaches the Irishman. He puts out a hand, which Cillian eyes for a second before firmly shaking it. Ezio stiffens when Cillian’s grip tightens, and he pulls him close.

“Make no mistake, Mr. Adamos,” he growls quietly. “If I find out you’ve lied to me—say, if these men of yours admit certain things you’ve left out, perhaps under torture…”

Ezio shivers. Cillian smiles.

“Then I will find you, and I’ll cut you from your asshole to the back of your fucking neck.”

He leans close to Ezio.

“*Via the front*.”

Ezio shudders and then nods stiffly. “I understand, Mr. Kildare.”

“Fantastic. Now, I’d *very* much like to be shown this van.”

When Ezio and Cillian are gone and I’m alone with my brothers again, Hades whistles low and turns to me.

“He’s certifiably insane. You know that, right?”

“I think I picked up on that, thank you, Hades,” I mutter dryly.

He shakes his head, looking away.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“*Speak*,” I growl.

My younger brother rolls his shoulders and turns back to me.

“Look, I understand it’s your throne. And yeah, on paper, this truce is a good thing.”

“But?”

He shrugs.

“*But*, have you really considered the family you’re joining with ours?”

“It’s politics, Hades. Nothing more. It’s like signing a treaty between two countries.”

He smirks, lifting a brow.

“Yeah, until Neve starts popping out babies, that is.”

Kratos chuckles. I glare at them both.

“That is *not* happening.”

“That confident in your pull-and-pray game, huh?”

I sigh as the two of them snicker.

“I mean *that* is not happening. She’ll be my wife in name only. I’m not going to fuck her.”

“You’re goddamn right you’re not.”

Shit.

The three of us turn at the sound of Neve’s voice in the doorway. She shoots daggers at me, arms folded over her chest. Her long red hair is out of its messy ponytail from earlier, and now cascades down over her shoulders and across the green of her shirt.

“You lay a fucking *finger* on me, assho—”

“Leave us,” I growl, turning to my brothers. The two of them eye me, then Neve, then me again.

“*Now*.”

“I’m walkin’, I’m walkin’,” Hades mutters, throwing a smirk Neve’s way as he and Kratos slowly move past her and out the door.

When we’re alone, I sigh and lean against the pew behind me, folding my arms across my chest.

“How are Castle and your sister?”

“They’ll be fine, thank you,” she mutters, still scowling at me.

“Yes?”

“I want to make sure you heard what I said. If you lay a single fucking finger on—”

I bark out a laugh. “Do you think I have *any* interest in laying a finger on you?”

Neve’s brows shoot up.

“What the fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It *means*,” I snap. “You are the furthest fucking thing from the ideal wife I could imagine.”

The redhead gapes at me.

“Okay, *rude*,” she sneers, shaking her head. “And fuck you, too—”

“You’re tempestuous, opinionated, rash, foul-mouthed… shall I continue?”

“Oh, *please* do!”

“You’re a slob.”

“*I’m n*—”

“I’ve seen your bedroom, Neve.”

Her words die in her throat.

“Don’t even try to deny it.”

Neve’s face burns hotly as she glowers at me.

“You have no grace, you’re difficult, and”—I run an eloquent gaze over her attire—“you have an abysmal sense of fashion.”

Her mouth makes a wide and scandalized “O” shape.

“Okay, so, first, asshole, eat a bag of dicks—”

She gasps I move closer to her.

“*All that said*,” I growl, making her shiver as I loom right over her. “When we’re married…when you’re my *wife*…”

Her breath catches sharply as my hand comes up to cup her jaw.

“If I *choose* to lay a finger on you, or several fingers, or even a whole hand…” I smile coldly. “Or things *other* than a hand…”

Her eyes grow even wider as her face turns crimson.

“You son of a—”

“If I choose to do any of that *to exercise my marital right*,” I hiss thinly. “I *will*. Is that understood?”

Neve bristles, simmering with hatred and heat as she glares up into my eyes.

"*Take your hands off of me*."

I keep my eyes locked on her. She swallows, and I try to ignore the way her pulse hums hotly underneath my fingertips.

"I said *take. Your. Hands. Off—*"

My fingers leave her skin and my hand drops back to my side. But I don't move away.

"For now, I will. But soon, Neve," I murmur quietly, relishing the way her breath hitches a little as I move closer. "When you're my wife, should I choose to, I'll be putting my hands on you whenever I want. *Wherever* I want."

Her face throbs with heat, her eyes bulge, and I can't miss the way her throat moves as she swallows the lump caught in it.

"*I'd like to see you try, asshole*," she hisses.

"Challenge accepted."

I turn and walk out the door without another word.

Alone in the elevator a minute later, I lean against the wall, my pulse thudding in my ears.

I wasn't lying, or trying to be an asshole. She really *is* the furthest thing I could have imagined for myself as a wife. She *is* all of those things I mentioned, and all of those things grind the fuck out of my gears.

So why does the idea of laying my hands on her despite all that give me such a thrill? Why does it turn my blood to liquid fire and my cock to

fucking steel?

Why does the idea of fighting with this woman I don’t even like for her obedience and her submission fire me up me so much?

And why does the idea of Neve Kildare, with all her fight and all her attitude, on her knees looking up at me and begging for my cock, engulf me with a desire stronger than anything I’ve ever felt in my life?

Maybe I’ll tame her. Or maybe she’ll kill me in my sleep. Either way, this is happening.

The only thing to do now is buckle up and hold on tight.

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NEVE

“DRINK?”

“Do bears shit in the woods?”

My uncle smirks, glancing at me over his shoulder as he pours two large whiskies.

“I don’t remember you having such a mouth on you when you were younger.”

He turns from the bar cart and moves to sit at his desk—formerly my father’s desk—before sliding one of the glasses across it toward me.

“*Sláinte*.”

“Cheers,” I murmur, clinking my glass to his before bringing it to my lips. “And that was probably because I was twelve the last time you spent any amount of time in New York.”

He lifts a brow in acknowledgement.

“So since then, you’ve gone full gangster?”

I grin. “Go figure, you get raised by a crime boss in a crime family doing criminal stuff, and then everyone acts all shocked when you don’t turn out

to be a princess or a congresswoman."

"Unless you're Eilish."

I roll my eyes, and my uncle chuckles quietly.

"I'm joking. And I'm not comparing you two."

I take another thoughtful sip.

"Sometimes I wish I was more like her."

"And why is that?"

I snort. "I don't know. Maybe because she's *nice*?"

Cillian shrugs, sipping his drink. "Nice can be a handicap."

"I don't know about that. It's working out pretty good for Eilish. People *like* her. And I'm just…"

"Prickly."

I grin. "Gee, thanks."

He grins back, toasting me with his glass before taking another long sip. I drink as well, glancing around at the office around us.

I hardly ever used to come in here. Back when it was my father's office, in my father's house. Cillian hasn't changed it much since he moved in with us a few months ago, after the shooting. But there's enough of him here now that it's beginning to feel more like his office than Dad's.

We grieved when my father was killed—Eilish and I, that is. But then, after some time, and a few tears, we were okay. Most people around us, I'm *sure*, have speculated that we're both putting on a brave face with all the changes that followed, that it's all an act.

We’re not, and it’s not.

Here’s the thing: Eilish and I loved our father. And despite his coldness and his brutality, I’m sure he loved us too. But after Mom died, he just sort of… I don’t know how to put it. It wasn’t that he didn’t love us. It was just that he was one of those parents that really didn’t ever…take to parenting.

Declan Kildare was our biological father. But he wasn’t ever really our *dad*, if that makes sense. And as to being a family, especially after Mom died, forget it. We were more like strangers who happened to be related.

“How’s Castle?”

Cillian grunts. “He’s not going to find it easy to breathe for a while with those bruised ribs, but he’ll be fine. Eilish?”

I shrug. “Also fine. We watched her favorite movie and pigged out on junk food before she fell asleep. She’ll be okay, she’s just a little shaken up.”

“And you’re not?”

My brow furrows. *Am* I?

Weirdly, no, I’m not. Which makes no sense. It’s not as if I’ve ever been witness to a drive-by shooting before.

“Maybe a little,” I lie.

Cillian, of course, sees right through me. But he doesn’t push it or call me out on it.

I frown as I glance at him over the rim of my glass.

“Any word on the shooters?”

“Handled.”

“Who was it?”

“No one you need to be concerned about.”

I sigh heavily. “Uncle…”

“Fine. Some of Ezio Adamos’ men, acting out of turn and strictly on their own.”

“And you believe that?”

“I do now.”

I frown. “Why?”

Cillian just smiles quietly, a venomous glint in his eyes.

Oh. I can connect the dots on my own.

Most people are scared of my uncle. But I’m not, and I’m not sure I ever have been. I mean, obviously I see him for who and what he is. I understand there’s a voracious darkness in him, just as I understand that he probably is legit somewhere on the sociopath spectrum, if that’s even a thing. But I don’t fear him.

I know he’s lethally dangerous if you’re his enemy. But he’s not a monster.

I’ve seen *real* monsters, when I was nine.

So has Cillian. He saved me from one.

My uncle sighs, setting his whiskey down and steepling his finger under his chin.

“I need to apologize for today.”

“You mean not telling me I was going to be a political bargaining chip?”

“Yeah.”

I suck on my teeth as I eye him across the desk.

“Why *didn’t* you tell me before?”

He shrugs. “Because I hadn’t completely decided one way or the other until we sat at that conference table today. I’m a people reader, and even if we’d talked about it beforehand, I had to sit down in that room with the two of you, and read both his face and yours, before I made my decision.”

“*Your* decision?”

There’s an edge to my voice that he doesn’t miss.

“Yes, Neve, *my* decision, as the head of this entire family and organization.”

Anger surges in my chest.

“And do I get no say in the fact that I’m being *married off*?!”

He shrugs. “Oh, you do. It’s just a much smaller say than mine.”

I stare at him. Cillian just sips his whiskey and looks right back at me.

“And if I refuse?”

“I wouldn’t suggest doing that.”

“No?” I snap. “Will I get the same treatment as whatever unholy hell happened to Ezio Adamos’ men today?”

Cillian sighs quietly.

“Neve, I think you know me well enough to know I’d go to the ends of the earth to protect you from harm.”

He really would. My anger fades. Embarrassment at my own accusations rises hotly in my cheeks, and I look away.

“I could threaten you, Neve,” he growls quietly. “Remind you that I could take away the trust fund that pays for your fancy apartment, your clothes, your whole life.”

“I don’t need a fancy apart—”

“*And* your education.”

My lips purse as I squint at him.

“You *could* threaten, or you *are* threatening?”

“My threats are seldom inconspicuous.”

He frowns deeply, twisting the glass on his desk in front of him.

“Neve, this is happening. It has to. End of story.”

“But why is that?” I snap.

“Look around you!” he growls. “The Kildare family has done well for itself—very, very well indeed. But we’ve hit our ceiling. Our rivals, on the other hand, don’t seem to *have* a ceiling. The Cartel? The Bratva? Neve, they’re more than criminal organizations. They’re multinational empires now.”

“So, I’m marrying Ares Drakos so you can buy a bigger house?”

He rolls his eyes.

“Don’t pretend to be fucking stupid, Neve, because I know you’re not. This isn’t about greed. It’s about survival. If we don’t grow, we’ll be left in dust and the shadows that those who are building the new empires leave in their wake.”

Cillian sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Ending the bloodshed with the Drakos family is imperative to survival today. Partnering with them is the only way to ensure we have a future.”

Anger simmers under my skin as I stand abruptly, knock back the rest of my whiskey, and slam the glass back down on the desk.

“So I guess I just drew the short straw, then?”

“You sure fucking did,” he hisses. “And I’m sorry for that, I truly am. But this is how families survive in this game, Neve. You know that. Look, I didn’t wish this for you. But this really is the only way.”

“I need some air.”

I start to make for the door to his office when his voice stops me.

“*Neve*.”

Cillian stands, his knuckles on the desk as he levels his eyes at me.

“You’ll marry Ares Drakos. And that’s final.”

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ARES

"ARES."

My grandmother smiles a regal, practiced smile as she embraces me.

"*Kai pós eínai o polemistís mou?*"

And how is my warrior?

"I'm fine, Ya-ya."

I hug her back, her frail, bird-like frame disappearing into my enormous arms for a minute before I pull back. She may be tiny, and it might look like a strong breeze would blow her to dust. But only a fool would underestimate or discount Dimitra Drakos.

Those thin, frail arms and that hawkish face contain all the lethality of a machine gun combined with the subtleness of a knife through the ribs. And no small wind is going to do *shit* to a woman whom even hurricanes fear.

"Come, Ares, let's sit."

Dimitra leads me through the lavish Drakos family home that I lived in before moving to the UK—a stunning and staggering neoclassical mansion perched at the top of a forty-story building on Central Park South. Twelve

bedrooms, twice as many bathrooms, terraces with *grounds* complete with two pools and a tennis court, and a wine cellar that rivals almost any other private collection in the States.

Needless to say, the line of brokers salivating in anticipation of the day we decide to sell this place is…lengthy. But they can drool all they want. It will stay in our family forever.

When we step into the parlor—Dimitra's favorite place in the house to hold court—we find it already occupied by Calliope.

Ever since we all moved back to New York, Calliope and Kratos are living here with Ya-ya. I'm in my new place on the West Side, and Hades is—to the best of my knowledge—somewhere in the Lower East Side, maybe Alphabet City. His exact address is a mystery. But given my younger brother's fondness for hedonism and chaos, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't want to be dropping by unannounced anyway.

When we walk into the room, my sister glances up from whatever she's scrolling on her phone and smiles wanly at me.

I know why.

One of the three men responsible for the shooting yesterday was a younger guy—Tomas, I think his name was. I sincerely doubt it was anything romantic, but I know he and Calliope palled around and were part of the same clubbing scene from time to time, being the same age.

Now, if he's lucky, Cillian's already killed him. If he's not lucky…well, he's not dead *yet*.

And my sister is fully aware that I gave the go-ahead for that to happen.

But even if she's angry, or hurting, even Calliope understands how our world operates. There are rules. There are chains of command. This is *not* a

democracy, it’s a fucking absolute monarchy.

And unfortunately, yesterday it was on me to play not only King, but judge and jury too. It was only the executioner part I left to Cillian.

I feel slightly bad about the way that had to play out. But Tomas and the two other men stepped out of line. So they paid the price. That’s the law of the jungle.

“How are you?”

Calliope sighs, shrugging, the brief flash of anger on her face melting away. Again, I know she understands how this all works. And I know even through her anger, she knows I had no choice to do what I did. Still. I’ll talk to her more later, away from Dimitra.

“I’m fine. Still a little spooked from yesterday, but fine.”

Dimitra makes an annoyed clucking sound against her teeth.

“My grandchildren are barely back home with me, and already I have to worry about *violence*.”

“It’s been dealt with, Ya-ya,” I growl quietly. “It won’t happen again.”

She sighs, shaking her head before glancing at my sister.

“Callie, my love, could you give us the room, please?”

My sister nods, putting her phone away and standing.

“*Naí, Ya-ya*.”

She walks over and gives our grandmother a quick hug and peck on the cheek before she turns to me.

“We’re long overdue for a dinner,” I murmur. “Let’s fix that soon, please. I want to—”

“It’s fine, Ares,” she smiles wryly. “*I’m* fine. Really. I get it, okay?” Her brows arches. “You’re the king now, right?”

She gives me a half smile as she pats my chest and walks past me out of the room.

“She’s angry about Ezio’s men, yes?”

I turn to nod at Dimitra. “She is. About one in particular.”

My grandmother frowns as she takes a seat on one of the sofas by the gigantic fireplace. I sit on the one opposite the little table between us.

“She loved him?”

I shake my head. “No… I don’t think so.”

“Lusted for him, then?”

My nose wrinkles. “Also no. I think they were just friends.”

Relief floods Dimitra’s face.

“Good. We wouldn’t want any rumors getting back to—”

“That fucking pig?”

Dimitra’s face stiffens at my language. She’s old-fashioned that way. But she lets it slide, only giving me a twisted smile.

Who she’s referring to—and who I will *always* refer to as “that fucking pig”—is Luca Carveli, head of the Carveli crime family on the west coast. A disgusting creep of a man with less than zero honor.

Who unfortunately also happens to be betrothed to my sister.

The arrangement was made by our father years ago, to settle a dispute between the families as well as cement a business pact that made both parties very, very rich. I'd burn the whole thing to the ground if I could, though. The idea of them together makes my skin crawl.

Because Luca is a violent, cruel man, not to mention thirty years older than Calliope. The one saving grace to the whole arrangement is that she doesn't become his until she turns twenty-one. But that's coming up quickly.

"It is what it is, Ares. This is how these things work. You obviously know that. But we can talk about your sister another time," Dimitra says with a slow nod. "Today, I wish to talk about you."

"Well, here I am."

"With a chip on your shoulder and words caged behind angry teeth, yes, I can see that."

I sigh. "Ya-ya, I'm doing what I need to do for our family. Please don't expect me to enjoy it."

She chuckles. "Ares, you are hardly the first Drakos to marry for reasons other than true love. And please, don't try and tell me you're not at least a little bit attracted to her. She's a very pretty girl."

I grunt noncommittally, even if my mind is flashing to a thousand swirling thoughts of Neve's face.

Of her sharp green eyes and fiery red hair.

Of her perfect tits and mouthwatering ass when she changed, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I can see into her apartment just as easily as she's been spying into mine.

"She'll make very pretty babies with you, too."

I blink, snapping out of my fantasies to make a sour face.

“*Not* happening.”

She snorts, waving a hand at me as she shakes her head.

“*Anoisíes*.”

“It’s *not* nonsense, Ya-ya. That isn’t part of the arrangement. We’ll marry. We’ll join Drakos to Kildare and keep the blood from spilling into the streets. But I will *not* be—”

“And why is that, hmm?”

I scowl. “Because she’s—awful.”

Dimitra cackles, her frail little shoulders rising and falling like tucked-back buzzard wings.

“Please. How exactly is she *awful*?”

“Would you like the full list, or just the bullet point elevator pitch?”

“*Theé mou*, the dramatics!”

My jaw clenches.

“She’s headstrong. Obstinate. She’s—”

“Strong men need not fear strong women, Ares.”

“*Óchi*, Ya-ya. I don’t *fear* her as such, and it’s not her strength that gets under my skin. No, it’s her *stubbornness*. Plus, she’s flighty. Quick-tempered.” I start to tick them off on my fingers. “Foul-mouthed. Crude. Lazy. Unsophisticated. And she tries to cover all of these flaws with an endless stream of sarcasm.”

“Well, you’re marrying her,” Dimitra shrugs.

“Yes,” I growl, “I am.”

“Then make her into what she needs to be.”

“And what exactly is that?”

“A queen fit for a god, Ares.” My grandmother shrugs quietly. “Do you think everyone marries for love? People in families like ours have married for power and protection for centuries. Do not forget, we are the descendants of Spartans.”

It’s her favorite myth, one that she persists in clinging to: that my siblings and I are directly related to the shirtless guys with the CGI abs from the movie *300*.

“I don’t have time for a queen, or a wife,” I grunt. “I’m trying to lead an empire.”

Not pick out coordinating fucking cutlery sets and china, or fucking curtains. Not, I gather, that Neve Kildare is that type of woman in the slightest, but still.

Crap.

Dimitra isn’t wrong. Neve *is* a stunningly beautiful girl. And in wildly different circumstances, if she wasn’t her or if I wasn’t me, then yes, I’d be more than happy to have her in my bed. On her knees. Across my lap. Against the fucking windows, begging me to fuck her any way and any *place* I choose with every inch of my thick cock.

But Jesus Christ, none of that would involve fucking *marrying* her.

“Is it her, or the concept of marriage that you seem to find distasteful?”

“I have nothing against marriage.”

“What about as it pertains to you personally?”

I shrug. “I have nothing against getting married myself, no.”

“And who *would* you marry, exactly? If we weren’t in this situation, and you had free choice?”

“That’s easy. A good, Greek—”

She scoffs abruptly.

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t try to pander to me with ‘a good Greek girl’, grandson. I’ve seen the girls you date. They’re *rarely* Greek, and believe me, none of them is good, in any way.”

I scowl. Dimitra smirks at me. There’s a pause.

“It’s a good match, Ares.”

“For the family.”

“For the family, yes. But for you, too.”

“Who’s pandering to whom now?”

“*Próseche ti glóssa sou*!” she gasps with a cluck of her teeth and scandalized look on her face.

Watch your tongue.

But when I grin, she rolls her eyes and smiles back. She reaches across the table between us, taking my hands in her small, wizened ones.

“*Agáli-agáli gínetai i agourída méli.*”

Little by little, it becomes honey.

“That’s about grapes and wine.”

She shrugs. “It’s a Greek proverb, it can be about anything. Grapes, wine…” She arches a silver brow at me. “*Marriage*…”

My brow furrows as my jaw sets. Dimitra pats my hand.

“If it’s not perfect, or if she’s not who you need her to be, then mold her. Mold both of you, if need be.”

“How the hell am I supposed to—”

“You’re a king, Ares,” she murmurs, eyeing me cooly. “You will do whatever you need to do for your family. Even if it means putting on a mask and playing the part you need to play.”

Then, with a shrug, she casts off her stern look and smiles at me as she pats my hand again, more gently this time.

“Come, let’s find Kratos and your sister. I want to eat dinner outside tonight.”

And I want to figure out how the fuck I’m supposed to marry the sharp-tongued, defiant little witch across the street from me without both of us killing each other.

And I want to figure that out *fast*.

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NEVE

HOLY SHIT, this place is a fucking palace.

From what I gather, there are *two* ways up to the sprawling, opulent, neoclassical mansion that the Drakos family calls home here in New York. You can either take the private elevator that goes straight up into the house itself. Or you can take the *other* elevator, the one that stops at the floor below the roof of the main building, on top of which the mansion sits.

From there, an elegant glass and stone staircase winds up into the grounds of the estate, letting the visitor step out of a gazebo-type structure across the gardens from the mansion itself.

Yes, there are gardens. There are *grounds*.

And yes, you can guess which entrance Cillian, Castle, Eilish, and I are led through when we arrive at the Drakos home for the "celebration dinner" to honor Ares and I's impending unholy matrimony.

We're on Central Park South, aka billionaire's row, and the Drakos family has what looks like could be an estate in the English countryside, complete with rose gardens, classical sculptures, a tennis court, and *two* pools, all sitting on fucking top of a building overlooking Central fucking Park.

It’s wild.

Needless to say, try as I can to keep my cool, my jaw still hits the floor when we step out of that gazebo. The grounds are draped with twinkling white string lights and hanging bulbs. A string quartet plays quietly on the far side of Pool Number One, and waiters in white dinner jackets are everywhere, passing trays of hors d’oeuvres and crystal flutes of champagne.

I’ve grown up with wealth, and the Kildare townhouse on the Upper East Side is dripping with money. But still, I mean, holy *shit*.

“Bit over the top, isn’t it?”

I smile when I hear the familiar voice. And when I turn, I grin and allow the portly older man to scoop me into a big hug.

“Owen!” Eilish beams when our father’s old friend lets me go and pulls her into a bear hug as well.

“Owen” is Owen Foley, head of the Foley family, a subsidiary to the Kildare empire. He and our parents were good friends, and we’ve known him since his waistline was about half of what it is now and his hair—what’s left of it—was sandy blonde instead of silvery-gray.

He’s old-school. By which I mean he might live like a prince now, but he came up through the ranks breaking kneecaps and cracking skulls like a real gangster. He’s sweet as a teddy-bear to Eilish and I, even often referring to us as his nieces. But he is *not* someone I’d want to be on the bad side of.

Owen turns to clap a friendly hand on Castle’s shoulder before he shakes Cillian’s hand firmly.

“Well, you did it, you crazy son of a bitch. Congratulations.”

Cillian lifts a shoulder deprecatingly as he slips a cigarette between his lips and lights it with a deft flick of his silver Zippo before turning to nod his chin at me.

“Neve deserves the real credit. Not me.”

Owen makes a clucking sound with his teeth as he shakes his head.

“You’re doing the family a huge service, Neve. I know it might seem grim, but when the Kildare empire grows into a dynasty—”

“Hey, Owen?” I smile weakly. “Is it all right with you it we get through dinner before we start tossing around the word dynasty?”

He grins. “Of course, of course.” He pulls me in for another hug and kisses the top of my head. “Forgive an old man for being proud of you?”

Cillian frowns as he glances around. “Who do I have to bribe to get one of those waiters to bring me something that isn’t fucking champagne?”

I grin as I turn to scan the stunning rooftop garden. “I’m sure we can—”

I freeze when my gaze is caught and hooked tight by another’s.

Someone with piercing dark eyes, and a lethally sharp jaw. Someone with dark, tousled hair and tanned skin.

Someone who looks *way* too fucking good in his dark suit right now.

Ares’ gaze doesn’t move one millimeter away from mine as he strides across the garden to where we’re all clustered. There’s a coldness to his smile as his eyes stab into me. I glare right back, a small sneer on my own lips.

It’s only when he’s stepped into the middle of us that the stern, dark look on his face cracks suddenly into a cordial, welcoming smile.

Interesting.

Ares might not have been born to be king, but he's grown into the role very well. He's good at this—blending in when he has to, appeasing when he has to.

Also being terrifying and intimidating when he has to.

"Thank you all for coming, and welcome to my family's home."

"Oh, this is your *home*?" Castle mutters, only half under his breath. "And here I thought we were at the Museum of Modern Art."

I freeze, watching Cillian bite back a smirk. Ares eyes Castle cooly, but his charming smile persists.

"Like the Irish, the Greeks had to take what they could, *when* they could, after coming to this country. This"…he turns and waves a hand at the sprawling mansion behind him…"is thanks to my great-grandfather Nico. He had a moderately successful smuggling business involving half a dozen fishing boats moving hidden cargo between Greece, Turkey, and Italy. When World War One broke out, there were countries with a vested interest in supplying the allied powers with weapons and aid, but couldn't be seen to be doing so, as they weren't officially in the war yet."

"Smart man, your great-grandfather."

Ares nods at Cillian.

"Indeed. Smart, crazy, and ballsy enough to offer his services to the United States government for a price. After the war ended, he came to New York and bought the very building we're standing on top of. He'd taken half his payment in war bonds, which meant when the Great Depression hit, he was fine. He bought into stock market for pennies on the dollar, and when it bounced back, well…"

He shrugs with an easy smile.

“Let’s just say there’s a reason this house looks like it was built in the English countryside.”

Next to me, Eilish’s brows shoot up.

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all. He had the whole thing shipped here brick-by-brick and reassembled.”

Ares clears his throat. “But enough about my house.” He turns and shakes Cillian’s hand, then Owen’s, before turning to Castle.

“I hope you’re feeling better.”

“I’m fine,” Castle grunts.

“And you, Ms. Kildare.” Ares turns, his face full of dashing charm as he smiles radiantly at my sister. “I need to sincerely apologize for what happened the other day.”

“Oh…it’s…” she stammers. And blushes. Fucking *blushes*.

My mouth purses.

Don’t fall for his bullshit, Eilish.

“I’m fine, thank you.”

“Good. And you look gorgeous, if I may say so.”

Her blush deepens as she glances down at the beautiful teal Maticevski gown she’s wearing to the formal dinner tonight, which of course makes her look even more like a Disney fucking princess. I have to admit, the color is stunning with her hair.

Ares' fake, saccharine smile stays plastered on his face as he finally turns to let those piercing eyes cut into me. I meet his gaze without flinching.

"And of course, my lovely bride-to-be, who looks absolutely *radiant* tonight."

I shift uncomfortably in the black sequined Dolce and Gabbana number I'm wearing that feels half a size too small. My brow cocks.

"Thanks. It's Eilish's."

"Well, with all due respect to your sister, it looks like it was made for you."

And then suddenly, still smiling sweetly, still letting those eyes slice into me, Ares moves right into my personal space.

And then the bastard keeps going.

His hand slides over my hip, and suddenly, every nerve in my body sparks as I realize what's happening.

Holy fuck is he seriously about to fucking kiss me?!

Yes, he is. But I turn my head at the last minute, shivering when I feel his soft lips and the scruff on his jaw brush against my cheek.

I'm still shaking and tingling when he pulls away and smiles to the rest of the group.

"Well, shall we go inside? Cillian, I'll bet you could use a real drink."

He beckons to one of the staff waiting in the shadows, who promptly rushes over.

"Please escort our guests of honor inside and see that they're taken good care of."

The man nods, smiling as he gestures for us to go with him. But I hang back, watching as Owen, Castle, Cillian, and my sister follow him across the gardens.

It’s not lost on me that Ares doesn’t go with them.

“Don’t think I don’t notice what you’re doing,” I mutter, turning to glare at him.

“And what exactly am I doing?”

“Laying it on a little thick, aren’t you?”

He smiles mirthlessly at me, arching a brow.

“It’s called being cordial. You should try it sometime.”

“Great. I’m going to go find a proper drink—”

“I noticed you put up curtains.”

I flush, simmering under his gaze.

“Yeah, I heard there was a peeping Tom in the neighborhood.”

“Funny, I heard the same thing.”

I try not to choke on my champagne.

“I find it amusing that you bothered, though.”

My brow furrows. “And why is that?”

The gasp falls unbidden from my lips as he slides his hand over my hip and pulls close to me again. I try to move back, but his grip on my hip tightens, keeping me pinned against his hard, powerful body. His mouth lowers, and I tremble when I feel his breath against my ear.

“Because there won’t be any curtains between us once you’re my wife.”

Sweet Jesus.

Something wicked and wrong throbs deep in my core, melting into heat that pools between my thighs.

Which is precisely when Ares abruptly pulls away.

I stare at him with a mix of shock and anger.

“Excuse me?”

“When we’re married, you won’t be hiding behind a curtain.”

“Ahh, no, the curtains will very much be staying up.”

He shrugs. “All right. But it won’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because you won’t be living there. You’ll be living with *me*.”

I blink in surprise.

“Uh…no I won’t?”

“Oh yes, you will. And before you go whining to your uncle, believe me, he’ll agree with me.”

“Why on *Earth* would I live with you?”

“This may come as a shock, but it’s a fairly common practice for married couples.”

I glare at him. “But we aren’t a *couple*. We’re a peace agreement.”

“Yes, a peace agreement that needs to be recognized not just by your family and mine, but all of our tributary and subsidiary families. By our business

associates. By our enemies and rivals, even."

Ares narrows his simmering dark eyes at me.

"We have to *sell this*, Neve. Or it doesn't work. So yes, you'll be living with me. Now," He clears his throat, pulling away. "I'm going to go make the rounds with the other guests and exchange pleasantries. I suggest you do the same."

And then he's gone, pulling away, turning, and striding back across the garden into the small crowd of guests.

I'M EXHAUSTED within ten minutes of stepping into the grand house. Person after person—heads of tributary families to both Drakos and Kildare, relatives, business associates—come up to me to congratulate me on my "impending nuptials".

And in those ten minutes, I'm honestly stunned that every single person here is either too dumb to realize how obviously staged my marriage to Ares is, or else is a *really* good actor.

"Here."

I jump, whipping around at the new voice behind me. But instead of yet another offered hand or kiss on my cheek to endure, I come face-to-face with a stunning girl with dark hair and bright blue eyes, wearing a gorgeous off-white strappy dress that beautifully complements her tanned, olive skin.

Calliope Drakos, Ares' younger sister.

"I thought you could probably use this." She raises one of the two crystal tumblers in her hands, filled with amber liquid and a single round ball of

ice, and offers it to me. “Whiskey’s your poison, right?”

“I think *alcohol* is my poison tonight. But yeah, it is.” I smile curiously as I take it from her hand. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I’m Calliope.”

“Hey. I’m—”

“Yeah, I mean, I know who you are.”

I grin sheepishly. “Sorry. Same.”

“Bored out of your skull yet?”

“More like completely overwhelmed, honestly.”

Calliope nods, arching her brows as she clinks her glass to mine. “Well, cheers. Aren’t fake marriages *fun*,” she drawls sarcastically. “You can’t tell if everyone around you is a really good actor or else just *way* dumber than you’d have thought, amirite?”

“Oh my God, *exactly*!” I blurt. “I mean, come on. It’s not like everyone here can seriously think your brother and I had a cliched Hollywood meet-cute, can they?”

She laughs, taking a sip of her drink.

“Some probably can. Others just know how to play the game. Or, if you’re my ya-ya—”

She turns to nod at, and then smile and wave to, an ancient-looking, tiny old lady sitting across the foyer in one of the living rooms full of party guests. The woman smiles at Calliope before turning her gaze onto me, where it lingers a bit before she gives a small nod.

“That’s my grandmother Dimitra. She’s like *old* old-school Greek mafia. In her mind, getting married to someone you don’t know in order to settle a feud *is* a Hollywood meet-cute. I’m fairly sure that’s how she and my grandfather got together, actually.”

“Can’t wait for the movie.”

She snickers. “Only if Glen Close plays Ya-ya.”

I laugh. “I’d watch it.”

We smile as an awkward silence descends, both of us sipping our drinks slowly.

“Look, I get it. Ares isn’t who you probably envisioned for yourself.”

“Yeah, *hardly*.”

I wince the second I say it, shooting her an apologetic look.

“Fuck, I’m so sorry, that came out totally wrong.”

But Calliope just brushes it off.

“No problem. Look, I get it. My brother can be a *dick*. But he’s not terrible. Trust me, there are *way* worse arranged mafia marriages out there.”

“Yeah? Like whose?” I mutter bitterly.

“Like mine.”

I flinch, frowning as my eyes dart back to hers.

“Shit, I fucked up again. I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Ech, don’t sweat it.”

“I’m…kind of famous for putting my foot in my mouth,” I mumble. “Sorry.”

She just laughs quietly. “No, really, it’s fine. I mean, no, it’s not *fine*. He’s a troll and thirty years older than me.”

My face falls. “*Fuck*.”

“Tell me about it. The glamorous life of crime family daughters.”

“When…?”

“Not for another year. Well, less than a year now. But, don’t worry, I’ve got it sorted.”

I make a face. “Let me guess. Sorted as in you’ve *made peace* with it.”

“*Fuck* no. I mean sorted as in I’m going to buy a fake passport and disa-fucking-ppear before I marry that creep.”

I frown, not sure if she’s serious or not. When she grins and winks at me, I grin back. I take a sip of my drink, turning to scan the crowd before my gaze suddenly snaps to a stop.

On Ares.

More specifically, on Ares grinning all over, talking with a pretty girl in a red dress with an *extremely* plunging neckline who’s currently playing with his tie.

I don’t even realize my jaw is clenching until it actually starts to hurt. It’s like a splash of cold water, shaking me and yanking my focus from the two of them. I quickly take a large sip of my drink.

What the *fuck* was that? Jealousy?

I make a face at myself.

Get a freaking grip, girl.

I don't even *like* Ares. And our marriage is a joke. I am *not* jealous of him flirting with…whoever the hell that is.

But when I glance back, it's back again: that green monster writhing inside of me, clawing its way out of my chest as my eyes fix on the two of them.

"Ugh, what is that cow even doing here?"

I start, blinking as I whip my attention back to Calliope.

"Hmm?"

She glares past me to the vixen in the red dress.

"Lucia Bolinaro. I mean honestly, don't read anything into it. She's been barking up my brother's tree for years. But still…" She glares at Ares. "*Not* a great look at your own engagement party, asshat."

Ares, as if sensing our attention, turns our way. He grins when he sees his sister. When he realizes it's me standing next to her, he keeps grinning. But this time, there's a little smirk to it as well.

And before I know what's happening, he's walking over to us, *with* the girl.

"Ahh, there you are," he says smoothly to me. "*Dear*, this is Lucia. Lucia, this is Neve."

The girl in red smiles plastically at me.

"So I've heard. My my, don't you clean up well."

I blink, staring at her in shock. I mean, I went to private school. And I grew up with money. I can talk smack as hard as she wants to go. But it catches me enough off-guard that I'm momentarily at a loss for words.

Calliope, however, is not.

“Doesn’t she?” she coos sarcastically at Lucia. “Pity you don’t.”

Ares’ brow furrows deeply as he shoots a cold glare at his sister before turning to me.

“Lucia’s father is Ricardo Bolinaro.”

Head of the Bolinaro Cartel goes unsaid.

“*Ohh*,” Calliope nods slowly. “So *that* explains the coke under your nose.”

Lucia’s hand flies to her nostrils. Which don’t actually have any cocaine on them. At least, not right now. When she realizes it, she launches a withering look at Calliope.

“And how *is* your fifty-year-old fiancé, Calliope?”

“Oh, *great*,” She gushes back in a fake valley girl voice. “Actually, you probably know him.”

Lucia frowns. “Why would—”

“I’m sure he’s friends with all those other old-guy sugar-daddies you usually hang your daddy issues all over.”

It takes everything I have not to burst out laughing. Like, *everything*. Calliope is officially all right in my fucking books.

Lucia, meanwhile, glares daggers at Calliope before turning to me.

“Congratulations,” she mutters with zero meaning behind it before turning and stalking back to the party.

“*Byyyee!* Miss you! Kisses!” Calliope throws out after her.

Ares’ face is cold and stern as he turns to level his gaze at his sister.

“What the actual fuck, Callie?”

“What? She’s a cunt. And it’s a seriously bad look to be flirting with other girls at your own engagement party.”

He rolls his eyes. “I wasn’t flirting. And she’s an important business connection. Grow up.”

Calliope glares back at him. “Well, your *actual* fiancée is super cool, and that wasn’t. Don’t be a dick.”

“And don’t make me threaten the bartenders with bodily harm if they keep serving you.”

“Hey!” Calliope blurts as her brother plucks the glass from her hand.

“You’re twenty, not twenty-one.”

“Oh my God, how are you the literal head of a crime family and this much of a simp for the rules?”

She sighs, turning to me.

“It was *great* to meet you. Sorry my brother is such a wet blanket.”

I grin. “Great to meet you too, Calliope—”

“Callie. You can just call me Callie.”

And with that, she turns and melts into the party, leaving Ares and I alone.

“Wow, well, Lucia seems *sooo* great.”

Fuck.

I hate that I said it the second it flies ouf of my mouth. Because it makes me sound—

“Jealous?”

I grit my teeth, willing the heat spreading across my face to go away. I turn to see Ares smirking at me, his devilish eyes glinting.

“Um, no? Gross.”

He grins.

“Lucia really is just a business contact. But just because *one* of us has some fun in this city…”

I see red. Or green. Or, I dunno, brown, or something. Whatever it is, it has me bristling as I purse my lips at him.

“Hey, I have *fun*.”

“Not from what I’ve seen through your bedroom windows, you don’t.”

I glare at him. "Creep.”

“Pot, meet kettle.”

I roll my eyes. “I wasn’t jealous. But you’re the one who said we had to sell this. It’s going to look pretty bad if my new husband is out sticking his dick in every pretty girl he sees.”

“I completely agree.”

Wait, what?

I turn back to him, shivering as his gaze slices into me. As his hand suddenly glides sensually over my hip, melting my flesh.

“Which is why I’ll only be sticking my dick into *one* pretty girl.”

His hand suddenly slides *all* the way back, making my eyes bulge as he casually and brazenly cups my ass through the gown.

I gulp.

“You wish.”

“I don’t have to wish. I know.”

“Keep dreaming, asshole.”

“I’ve noticed you haven’t moved my hand from your ass, by the way.”

I flush bright red as I shove my hand back and grab his wrist.

“Uh-uh-uh, it’s too late now.”

“Late? Why?”

“Because I’ve already been grabbing your ass for the last minute and a half, and people have noticed. Now, they’re watching, because they think it’s cute. If you shove my hand away, it’s going to look bad.”

“It’s also going to look *bad* if I stab you in the dick with my heel in five seconds. Get your fucking hand off my ass.”

“I will, when it’s appropriate to do so.”

I stare at him. “It’s *appropriate* to take your hand off someone *when they fucking ask you to*.”

His grin widens.

“You do know we’re supposed to make little peace treaty babies, don’t you?”

I flush deeply, shivering under the heat and power of his hand still on my ass.

“Now, how do you suppose we’ll do that without the…” his grin widens. “The *mechanics* involved.”

My cheeks burn hotly as I glare up into his unreasonable, outrageously attractive face.

“There’s not going to *be* any babies, and there’s certainly not going to be any *mechanics* between us.”

“I think we should put a wager on—”

“Neve?”

I jump at the sound of my sister’s voice. I whip around, quickly yanking Ares’ hand off my ass at the same time.

“Oh, hey!” I blurt awkwardly.

My face is still throbbing. So is my ass where his hand was just gripping me.

“Have you seen Castle?”

“No, why?”

She chews on her lip, turning to scan the room.

“Eilish? What’s up?”

“I—” her eyes dart to Ares and back to me.

“That Ezio guy just walked in.”

Shit.

“And I’m worried that Castle will…you know. Start something.”

Yeah, same.

“Shit. Okay, you head that way, I’ll head over there.”

Eilish nods and disappears back into the party. I turn to go the other way when Ares stops me with a firm grip on my arm.

“I’ll come with you. I can help.”

“You know what?” I smile sweetly at him. “How about I go this way, and you go help Lucia find the missing front clasp on her gown. Or a fucking *bra*, for that matter.”

I turn on my heel, yanking my arm away as I plunge into the crowd.

I am *not* jealous.

No. Fucking. Way.

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ARES

"WHAT'S GOING ON?"

I grimace at Kratos' worried face.

"Ezio's here."

"*Shit.*"

"Yeah, I need him out of here before he lights a fucking fuse on this thing."

Kratos nods. "On it."

"Any idea where Hades is?"

My younger brother gives me a significant look, and I roll my eyes.

Great. Some girl. As if I don't have enough fires popping up without Hades sticking his dick in the daughter of a subsidiary family. Or worse, one of the *Kildare's* subsidiary families.

"*Find him,* make him put his dick back in his pants, and then fucking find Ezio. Please."

"I've got you," Kratos rumbles before turning and shoving his way into the party.

“Well, *she’s* going to be a lot of fun, isn’t she?”

I frown, turning at the sound of Lucia’s voice.

“Excuse me?”

She rolls her eyes.

“Your *wife*.”

I can see where she’s going with this. Because it’s happened before, with other women I’ve been with. Even though every relationship I’ve ever had could be described as casual, at best. And that’s being *very* generous.

Lucia and I go fairly far back together. Not *together*-together, of course, though she’s made it painfully, abundantly clear that she’d be more than okay with it if things were to go there between us.

Spoiler alert: they won’t. Ever.

I could list all sorts of reasons why they won’t, like the fantastic business her father and our family do together, and that the chance of us getting together and then not working out could jeopardize that. Or the fact that I know damn well that Ricardo Bolinaro has other marriage plans for his only daughter.

But most importantly, Lucia and have never been—and *will never* be—a thing because I see right through her. Her overblown attempts at flirting or seduction when it comes to me aren’t because she’s interested.

It’s because she’s fucking good at what she does.

For all intents and purposes, Lucia *is* the voice and seat of power for the Bolinaro Cartel, at least Stateside, where her father has a hard time visiting due to ongoing legal issues. And she does it all hiding in plain sight as a trust fund brat partying with the international socialite crowd.

Bottom line, Lucia sees me as a mark. And she thinks showing her cleavage and disparaging the woman I'm going to marry is a means of breaking down my defenses. Especially when it comes to the terms of the trade deal between her family and mine that we've been trying to hammer out.

"Ares?"

I frown, snapping out of my reverie and staring at her through a furrowed brow.

"What did you say about my wife?"

Lucia rolls her eyes. "I said *she's* going to be fun—"

"You know what, I'm going to do us both a favor right here and right now, Lucia," I snap, startling her.

"Ares, I—"

"I *will not* allow you to shit on Neve Kildare. Is that crystal fucking clear?"

She frowns.

"Why?"

I stare at her. "Because it's obnoxious, and unnecessary."

"No, I mean why is *she* the line you won't cross, or allow someone else to cross?"

My brow furrows, my thoughts snarling into a sudden traffic jam.

Uhh…

"Because she's going to be my *wife*, that's why."

"Ares, *please*. I'm not one of the sycophants here to kiss the ring or bow at your feet. We both know why you're marrying—"

“The why is none of your fucking concern,” I growl. “Now, is that clear?”

Her lips purse. This honestly may be the first time in her entire life a man has ever said no to her.

“I asked you a question, Lucia. Is. That. Clear?”

Her face darkens, her eyes narrowing.

“*Careful*, Ares,” she hisses through clenched teeth. “Let’s not forget who my father is, not to mention the volume of business he chooses to do with your family.”

“I’m confident that is *not* dependent on whether or not I suffer his daughter’s Machiavellian bullshit.”

Lucia looks like I’ve just slapped her.

“Asshole.”

“Yeah, well, take a number and get in line.”

She sneers and stalks off into the house.

I roll my eyes before suddenly remembering the issue at hand: Ezio, showing up to this of all fucking parties, like the goddamn idiot that he is.

A lit match waltzing into a party full of dry tinder.

Neve and I aren’t married yet. And until we are, this little ceasefire between Drakos and Kildare after the events that killed my uncle and her father is hanging by a fucking thread.

I storm through the party like a vengeful wraith, looking left and right for Ezio.

I have to find him before he blows this whole fucking thing to kingdom—

Fuck.

There he is. I spot Ezio over by the far side of the gardens, near the edge of the building that drops forty stories straight down to Central Park South.

Alone, with Neve.

FUCK.

I bolt across the garden, almost knocking one of the waiters into a pool, trying to get to them before Ezio says or does something stupid.

Or Neve does, for that matter.

I'm mere feet away from them, just on the other side of a hedge, when suddenly, I stop short at the sound of Neve's voice.

"I said is that *clear*, Mr. Adamos?"

"Look, Neve—"

"It's Ms. Kildare. Soon to be Mrs. Drakos, in case you'd forgotten."

My brow lifts as I peer through a small gap in the hedge. Neve and Ezio are standing alone by the edge. Ezio's face is flushed, his eyes wild. He's clearly been drinking, and it definitely looks like he was trying to start shit with Neve.

Except she's standing tall and firm, holding her own with a stern, cold look on her face. Fuck me.

Ezio scowls. "*Look*. I know your daddy got killed, too. But those were *good* men—"

"I don't give a shit if they were Mother Teresa, Lady Gaga, and fucking *Jesus*. You need to understand *who I am to you*."

A small smile teases at the corners of my mouth.

Well…this is interesting.

Ezio starts to open his mouth. But Neve shuts that down fast as she continues to dress him down.

“Now, you will address me with courtesy, or you will not address me at all. *I* am your king’s new queen, remember? And if you so much as fucking *glance* at my sister again, I’ll have you thrown off a roof.”

Ezio’s eyes bulge as she suddenly steps closer to him, her hand jutting out and grabbing his collar in her fist.

“I may even do it myself.”

Okay. I’m impressed.

And hard. What the fuck?

Ezio’s face crumples, and suddenly, the man is honest-to-God crying.

“I—*I’m so sorry*, Ms. Kildare,” he chokes. “I promise you, the men responsible for the other day have been dealt with. My son was much beloved by my men. Please forgive their anger. And *please*…” he chokes. “Forgive me. My grief…”

“I’m truly sorry for your loss, Mr. Adamos.”

And suddenly, Neve is *hugging* him, stroking his back comfortingly as he sobs quietly for a moment before pulling away. He smiles a crooked smile, wiping his eyes.

“Christ, Ms. Kildare, you must think I’m a buffoon.”

She shakes her head, smiling at him. “No, Mr. Adamos, I don’t. I think grief hurts, and it’s rare that we know what to do with it.”

He smiles at her.

“Ares was lucky to find you,” he says quietly.

“Why’s that?”

“Because you, Ms. Kildare, are a true queen.”

I watch in a daze as my future wife turns a shit situation into solid gold. And for the first time, I realize two things.

One, Neve is a fucking force to be reckoned with. She’s bold. She’s tough. And she’s ballsy.

And two, all of that is a *serious* turn on.

I’m so fucked.

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NEVE

THE ENGAGEMENT PARTY was one thing. But a week later, the true reality sets in: I move into Ares' apartment the night before our wedding.

Yeah.

I stand in the near-emptiness of what was once my "dream apartment", watching the movers slowly box up the rest of my stuff. And when I look up, through the windows, it's even worse. Because across the street, I can see *those same movers* bringing my things into Ares' penthouse.

It's like he's not just content with absorbing me into his world and making me his freaking bride. He has to take all my damn stuff, too. My books, my clothes, my keepsakes. It's all being sucked into the dark Ares vortex, along with me and my apartment.

I think it's the apartment that stings the most.

Moving out of the family house and into my own place was a huge step for me. And I've *loved* living here. But, as of an hour ago, it's been sold, so the broker called to let me know.

That hurts.

I thought briefly about keeping it, even if I was forced to live across the street. But the idea of looking out the windows every day and seeing my dream just sitting here empty felt too sad even to contemplate.

Well, maybe now it'll be someone else's dream apartment. Someone who won't have it yanked out from under them when they're forced to marry the god of war himself.

The last of the moving boxes is carried out the door. And then, I'm alone in the emptiness.

I jump when I feel a hand on my shoulder. But it's just Eilish. She gives me a sympathetic look, followed by a sly smile.

I frown. "What?"

"Well, I know how much moving out of the house and getting this place meant to you, and I know you're sad to give it up."

My face falls as I turn to survey the empty apartment.

"*Yeah*, it's—"

"So I bought it."

I stare at her. "I'm sorry, *what*?"

She grins at me. "I bought it. Honestly, Neve, you need a better agent. This was listed *way* under other comps in the neighborhood—"

I choke back tears as I hug her fiercely.

"*Thank you*. Look, I'll pay you back—"

"Nope, you won't. It's my…" she shrugs. "My wedding present to you. Look, I know you have to *live* with Ares. But maybe you can use this place as an office or something?"

“You’re the greatest sister ever, you know that?”

“Well, duh.”

We both turn at the sound of a knock on the open door behind us. Calliope’s standing there, her eyes dragging around the empty space.

“*Wow*. This place is *gorgeous*. I love the light in here.”

“Yeah, me too.”

She wrinkles her nose. “Sorry you have to give it up and move into Ares’ place. At least he’s a tidy to a fault. And he’s *obsessed* with having clean sheets and towels. So, there’s that.”

I grin. “Actually, my amazing sister just made sure I can hang onto this place too.”

Calliope arches her brows, turning to grin at Eilish. “Man, how do I get a sister like you?” She frowns. “Or a sister at all, to counteract all the brothers?” She beams as she marches right over. “Hey, sorry, I don’t think we met at the engagement party. I’m Calliope.”

“Eilish, hey.”

Calliope turns to me. “So, what are you guys doing tonight?”

I shrug. “We were going to chill at home, maybe watch some movies and order Chinese food.”

Ares’ sister makes a face.

“Yeah, that’s good…too.”

I laugh. “I don’t know. It’s not like I want to go out and celebrate like it’s a real wedding tomorrow. I mean, no offense, but—”

“Oh, none taken.” Calliope chews on her lip before she turns to me. “Are you dead set on the Chinese food and movies thing?”

“Not really.”

Eilish shrugs. “I’m in for whatever Neve wants to do.”

Calliope clears her throat. “Can I make a counter-suggestion, then?”

“Sure.”

She grins at Eilish and I.

“Do you guys like dancing?”

FOUR HOURS LATER, I’m legit *drunk*.

But I’m also having the time of my life. Calliope has brought us to this place called The Deep somewhere in Brooklyn. It’s got super fun thudding 80’s dance music blasting, amazing cocktails, and a very, ahh, *lax* policy on checking Calliope’s ID at the front door.

The three of us are having a *ball*.

“Cheers!!”

I let out a whoop, each of us dropping a shot of raspberry vodka into a pint glass of prosecco with a float of vanilla rum on the top. The shot glass hits the bottom, turning the whole glass into a magical-looking bubbling pink concoction that we quickly bring to our lips. We gulp them down in record time, laughing our asses off when we slam the empty pint glasses down on the bar.

We're getting good at drinking these without spilling them everywhere. I mean, we sure as hell *should be*, considering it's our fourth round.

"Let's do another!"

Eilish, who drinks, but is a total lightweight, shoots me a "please no" look. I mean, she's having fun, but it's also clear that that last round is probably her limit for the night.

But me? Tonight, I'm drinking like I'm on a mission. Anything to avoid thinking about the fact that tomorrow I'll be getting married to a man I hardly know.

"Okay, okay, just two." I grin a sloppy, indulgent grin at my sister before I turn to flag down the bartender.

A big hand clamps down on my wrist, pulling my hand back down.

"I think that's enough, kid."

I turn to glare at Castle.

"Oh look, someone invited a party pooper along!"

He gives me a look.

"C'mon, Neve. Look, I get it. You want to cut loose, have some fun. So *have fun*. But getting shit-faced is the opposite of that."

I roll my eyes.

"Who even invited you, anyway?"

He's been here the whole time, hurling disapproving looks at me from the far end of the bar, where he's been nursing the same ginger ale for three fucking hours.

“My *job* invited me. You know, the one where I’m tasked with making sure your drunk ass doesn’t get into any trouble?”

Calliope snorts, shooting Castle a look before glancing at me.

“I like him.”

“Great, you can have him. That’s my bachelorette party gift to you.”

“Ooo, can I keep him?”

“Yep!”

“*No*,” Castle mutters at the exact same time. He turns back to me. “Go dance and have fun, kid. Knock yourself out. But the bar is closed.”

“You’re a jerk.”

“Okay.”

I glare at him one last time before Eilish and Callie pull me away.

“C’mon, Neve, you love this song,” my sister grins at me—obviously way past buzzed but still not as drunk as Callie and I are.

She’s not wrong. I fucking *love* Madonna’s “Into the Groove”.

“Ugh, fine, let’s go dance,” I blurt, letting Eilish pull me away. Castle gives me a firm look before he slinks back to his ginger ale at the far end of the bar.

“I’m just grabbing a water!” Callie yells over the music. “I’ll meet you out there!”

Eilish and I melt into the crowd on the dance floor, and I let *go*. I close my eyes, throw my hands up, and just fucking dance as the alcohol and serotonin course through my bloodstream. I feel the heat of the club, feel

my hair sticking to my forehead, feel the sweat trickling down the small of my back.

One last night of freedom, before I'm chained to Ares forever.

And until then, Eilish and I are going to dance our *asses* off. We're having a blast doing it, too. I cheer when I realize Callie has rejoined us, turning to give her a big drunken hug.

"Psst. Brought you something."

I glance down between us to realize she's very deftly holding two pints of prosecco with vanilla rum floats, and two shots of pink raspberry vodka. When I drag my eyes up to hers, she's grinning from ear to ear.

"I'm going to really love being your sister-in-law, aren't I?"

"*Yup*!"

I glance back at Eilish, who just laughs and shakes her head.

"Hey, it's your bachelorette party."

"*Heeellll yes* it is!"

I turn back, clink my pint glass to Callie's and drop in the shot.

"Cheers!"

I HAVE no idea what time it is, but I know I'm wasted. Like, very, *very* wasted, especially after Callie managed to sneak two more rounds of drinks past a watchful Castle.

Out on the dance floor, I'm a hot mess, but I'm having an absolute *blast*—dancing like a maniac, soaked in sweat, my hair all over the place. I have no idea where I got it, but there's a glass of whiskey in my hand. I grin wildly as I take a big slug of it and throw my head back to scream up at the ceiling through the roar of the music.

…Which abruptly shuts off.

The ugly lights go on, blinding me as a sea of boos from the other patrons fills the space. I turn to Callie to see her looking equally as confused as I am. It can't be closing time already. I turn unsteadily, find Eilish, then watch as her face scrunches up, her gaze sliding past me.

"*Oh shit,* Neve…"

"What—*HEY*!"

I scream, thrashing as strong hands grab my arms, yanking me back through the crowd.

"HEY!! HELP! Somebody HELP!"

Fear explodes in my drunk brain.

"CASTLE! *Castle!*"

When I whip my head around and see him standing almost right next to me, brow furrowed and arms crossed over his chest doing *nothing*, I balk.

"What the fuck are you—"

"I told you fucking chill, kid," he mutters.

I thrash some more as I'm suddenly lifted up three steps to the door to the club and then yanked through it and out into the cool of the night. The

hands let me go, and I whirl on the two enormous men who dragged me unceremoniously out of the club.

“Who the *fuck* do you think you—”

“Neve.”

I stiffen instantly. Even with the alcohol blurring and dulling my senses, I can feel the sheer power of his voice rumbling from behind me.

I swallow, the fresh air suddenly making me feel way, *way* drunker than I did inside the club. I sway on my feet, frowning as the world spins a little before I manage to turn to face him with only the smallest stumble.

Ares, clad in a dark suit, glares down at me beside the open door to a black SUV.

“Party’s over. Get in the fucking car.”

My lips purse.

“No.”

Ares’ jaw grinds, the muscles in his neck rippling dangerously.

“You’ve had your fun. Your *bachelorette*. But we’re getting married *tomorrow*. You’re done. Get in.”

My stomach churns, making me blanch as I try to steady myself.

“I don’t think we understand each other.”

He groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m not doing this with you on the side of the street. Get. In. The. Fucking. *Car*.”

“See, you think marrying me—which, by the way, I am supremely against, in case anyone’s curious—”

“I’m not, actually—”

“Means that you *own* me.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s not—”

“Oh, no, I think it is. See, *you* want some skanky Cartel chick with her tits falling out who’ll say *yes, Ares! Whatever you want, Ares!*”

“Neve, get—”

That’s when I realize I’m still holding my glass of whiskey. And everyone —Eilish, Castle, Callie, the guards, Ares himself—very quickly goes silent and still when the contents of that glass sloshes into Ares’ face.

“But, the thing is,” I slur, feeling the world spin around me. “You *don’t* actually own…own…”

Fuck.

It happens before I can even move. The God-knows-how-many prosecco and raspberry vodka cocktails I’ve consumed on an almost empty stomach come rushing back out to say hello…

…All over Ares’ shoes.

That’s when I black out.

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ARES

IT'S WEIRD, seeing her in my bed like this.

It *shouldn't* be, especially since she lives here now, and by this time tomorrow, she'll be my wife. But still, there's something unexpected that rattles inside of me when I poke my head into *my* bedroom to find her tucked under the covers, fast asleep. Or, let's be honest, passed the fuck out.

Eilish looks up from where she's perched on the side of the bed, a sheepish, maybe slightly scared expression on her face.

"Sorry—"

"You don't have to be sorry," I mutter quietly. "You're not her keeper. Neve is an adult."

She nods uncomfortably. "Well, I may have had something to do with tonight…"

She did. But I know damn well she's not the one who fueled and fanned the fire to keep it going.

I'll be dealing with *that* specific person in a minute.

"We haven't really gotten much of a chance to talk, have we?"

Eilish smiles wryly, shaking her head. “I…I guess not.”

“You don’t have to be afraid of me, you know.”

She raises her eyes to me, a curious expression on her face.

“I’m not scared of you.”

It’s not a challenge. It’s not bravado. It’s actually weirdly honest.

“I *am* scared of what’s going to happen to my sister, though.”

“I’m not going to hurt her, Eilish.”

“I know.” She smiles at me. “You’re dangerous, but not *that* kind of dangerous.”

“And what kind of dangerous is that?”

“The kind women have to watch out for. But, I know that’s not you. I can see it in your eyes.”

She turns to look at Neve, sound asleep in my bed. She pulls the covers up a bit more over her sister’s shoulder.

“I’m more worried that she’ll lose who she is, being with you.”

My brow furrows. “How do you mean?”

“Neve’s strong. I mean, really, *really* strong. When we were little—” Eilish stops, frowns, looks away. “Anyway, she’s just strong. And I think it’s thrown her for a loop that she suddenly has to play this wife role now to heal the feud between our families. Marrying you isn’t something she’d have chosen for herself.”

I lift my brows. Nice to learn that my blushing bride’s little sister pulls fucking *zero* punches.

Eilish glances at me quickly.

“Sorry, that came out wrong.”

I just smile and shake my head. “It’s fine. My skin is thicker than that.”

“No, I mean, I don’t think marriage *at all* is something she’d have chosen for herself. Ever. To anyone.”

Same.

I mean, I’ve thought about it before. I’ve wondered if there was someone out there for me—someone I’d actually want to spend my life with. But the closest I got imagining that ephemeral person was essentially me in female form.

Which probably speaks to an underlying narcissism I’m not ready to dive into *quite* yet, thank you very much.

But that’s who I’ve imagined. Someone calm and level-headed. Someone who considers the risks and the rewards before jumping into something with both feet. Someone strong and goal oriented. Someone sophisticated.

I’ve never once imagined someone like Neve Kildare. But now, here we are.

“Look, Ares, tonight wasn’t *her*, just so you know.”

“I didn’t think it was.”

“I mean, I don’t want you to think she’s like, a big partier or a drunk or anything.”

I smile tiredly. “Eilish, I understand the concept of blowing off steam.”

Fuck knows I’ve done it myself more often that I should.

She frowns. “Do you want me to try and move her to the couch or something?”

“What?”

“I mean…” she blushes. “Sorry, it feels weird to let her sleep in a bed with you without her being awake to even know it’s happening…”

“I hope she knows what a good sister she has.”

Eilish’s face reddens as she smiles.

“But that won’t be necessary. I’m not staying here tonight. My grandmother wants me to sleep at the Drakos family home the night before the wedding.” I shrug. “*Not* with my bride-to-be. She’s old-fashioned that way.”

Eilish nods. “Do you mind if I stay here with her, then? We…that was kind of our plan tonight anyway, before…”

“I’d prefer it, actually.”

She smiles at me.

“I know Neve isn’t probably what you’d have picked for yourself, either. But she’s actually pretty great.”

“I’ll try and keep an open mind.”

I leave Eilish alone with her sleeping sister, closing the door to my room before I turn and stride back to the main living room with a scowl on my face. Calliope looks up from where she’s balled up on the couch nursing a soda water, a bottle of aspirin already open on the coffee table in front of her.

“Look, Ares—”

“She’s not your fucking sorority sister best buddy, Callie!” I snap before she can say another word. “She’s going to be your—”

“My *what*?” my sister spits back. “My *queen*?” She rolls her eyes. “No, Ares. She’s going to be my sister-in-law.”

“Please don’t tell me I need to explain the subtle underlying points of this marriage to you.”

“Oh, fuck off. I know it’s not *real*, dick. But at the same time, it actually *is* real. You’re *really* marrying Neve tomorrow, Ares. Which makes her my actual sister-in-law. And I know neither of you planned this, or would have even picked each other out of a thousand other options if you’d been given the choice. But I’m not going to apologize for trying to make the best of things and find common ground here. I won’t apologize for *liking* her.”

“Then you can fucking marry her,” I grumble.

“Gladly!” she snaps. “Would it get me out of marrying Luca fucking Carveli?”

I wince, frowning as the tidal wave of anger starts to ebb out of me. Callie and I glare at each before I slowly exhale and look away.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

“Tonight was way out of control, though, and I know you know that. There’s a *lot* of people out there in the city who are not exactly thrilled that our family and the Kildares are merging.”

“We had that sexy bodyguard of theirs with us.”

I roll my eyes.

“A, don’t fucking tell me that. B, he’s one man. I don’t care if he’s Army Rangers or whatever. He’s still one fucking guy. And C, it’s made even worse by the three of you being shit-faced.”

Callie smirks at me.

“Is it the being drunk part, or the part where Neve might’ve been out there grinding on some hot guy at the club?”

I *hate* the roaring surge of jealousy that explodes through my system the second she says it. It takes everything I have to keep my face utterly neutral.

“This is all pretend, Callie,” I growl, more as a reminder to myself than to her.

“She wasn’t, for what’s it worth. Grinding, I mean.”

“I don’t care.”

“Uh-huh. Sure.”

I roll my eyes.

“She’s pretty fun, you know.”

“Noted. Come *on*, we’re leaving.”

She frowns.

“Actually, I think I’m going to stay here tonight.”

“What?”

“Yeah, Neve invited me to, earlier.”

“When she was blackout drunk.”

“Har-har. Can you please just let me enjoy having a sister for once?”

I smile wryly at her. “You’re staying?”

“I’m staying.”

“Should I lock the liquor cabinet?”

Callie flips me off with both hands.

“Go get some sleep, dickhead,” she groans, slumping back on the couch. “Don’t forget, you’re getting hitched tomorrow.”

As if I could fucking *possibly* forget.

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NEVE

SWEET MERCIFUL CRAP. Everything hurts.

I groan, wincing at the blades of pain that slice through my skull. I blink, and when I still see darkness, panic starts to grab me. I jolt bolt upright. That only brings on a fresh crash of pain stabbing through my head and nausea roiling in my stomach.

Jesus, what the fuck happened to me?

But then, as I sit there in the dark, it all comes rushing horribly back. The club. The drinks—*all* the drinks, ever, in the history of the world. The dancing. And then…

Oh, shit.

My stomach heaves as I remember throwing the drink in Ares' face and then puking all over his shoes. I groan, panicking as I glance side to side, only now realizing I'm in a bed.

His bed.

My heart lurches as I turn my head, suddenly realizing there's a warm body lying next to me.

Oh my God.

Before I know what I'm doing, I'm shoving him away and scrambling from the bed even as I'm trying not to puke.

"Get the fuck away from—*OW*!" I howl in pain as I slide from the bed and immediately bang my shin on the bedside table.

"Neve!"

I whip my gaze up to the sound of my sister's voice. I blink, and slowly, as my eyes begin to adjust to the darkness, I realize it's not Ares in bed with me. It's Eilish.

"Hang on."

I hear her rustling. Then suddenly, warm light floods the huge bedroom as she flicks a switch on her side of the massive bed. I wince, looking away and groaning as my eyes adjust yet again. I blink, slowly getting my bearings.

Yes, I'm in Ares' bedroom. And when I glance at the walls, I realize why I couldn't see shit in here. He's got those track-mounted blackout shades over the entire huge wall of windows.

I groan as the stabbing sensation slices into my head again. I'm not completely sober yet. But, I'm far, far more sober than I was earlier. Gingerly, I raise my head to cast a sheepish look at my sister.

"Hey."

She gives me a sympathetic look. "Hey yourself. How're you feeling?"

"Like absolute shit."

She makes a face as she jumps from the bed with an ease that is enviable to me in my current state.

“Hang on.”

She darts into the ensuite bathroom, where I hear her rustling around. A minute later, she emerges with a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin.

“Oh Jesus, gimme gimme,” I groan thankfully as she pops three pills into my palm and hands me the glass. I swallow them down, followed by the rest of the glass of water.

“Little better?”

I wince, nodding as I lie back down on the bed.

“I will be in a bit. Thank you.”

Eilish curls up next to me, face-to-face, like we used to do when we were kids under the blanket fort.

“Is he here?”

She shakes her head. “No. Callie is, though. On the couch in the living room.”

“What time is it?”

“Not actually that late. We went out super early. It’s only two in the morning.”

I make a face. “So…tonight kinda got away from me.”

She grins. “Yeah, a little. But you had fun.”

“Did I?”

She giggles. “Oh trust me, you did.”

Crap. “I didn’t do anything completely embarrassing, did I?”

She winces.

“I mean *aside* from puking all over Ares’ shoes.”

Eilish shrugs. “Not really. Well, except you kind of yelled at Castle.”

I groan, making a note to apologize to him in the morning. “Great.”

“I think he’ll understand, Neve. You needed to vent.”

I close my eyes, nodding as I let my cheek sink into the pillow.

“I wish I could do this for you, you know,” Eilish murmurs quietly.

“No, you don’t, trust me,” I sigh. “But I love you for saying so.”

“Well…” she grins impishly. “I mean, at least he’s handsome?”

“Yeah, at least there’s that.”

“Nervous about tomorrow?”

“No.”

Yes. And I hate that I am, given that it’s not even a real wedding.

Eilish bites her lip. “Can I…”

“What?”

“Can I see it?”

I grin. It’s *so* Eilish that she wants to see the dress, even after this disaster of a night, even fully knowing that tomorrow is all just an act.

“Yeah,” I smile. “Sure.”

With the self-control of a monk, she casually slips from the bed instead of leaping out of it like I know she wants to. She pads into the enormous walk-in changing room and closet attached to Ares' bedroom, and comes back out with a huge white garment bag.

The two of us bought it three days ago. It took all of nine minutes, because it's the second dress I tried on. The only reason I didn't pick the first is that Eilish pleaded with me to try this second one, and I gave in.

I haven't looked at it since.

Neve hangs the bag on the back of the bathroom door. She unzips it slowly and reverently, letting the light from the bedside table glow on the white gown inside.

Okay, dammit. I'll admit it.

It's one *gorgeous* dress.

"You're going to look so beautiful tomorrow."

"I'm going to look so fucking *hungover* tomorrow."

She grins at me as she zips the garment bag back up. "Let's get some sleep, then."

I make a pit stop in the bathroom to quickly rinse off in the shower and brush my teeth. Then, I slide into bed with my sister and close my eyes, listening as her breathing turns heavy and she falls back asleep next to me.

Sleep doesn't come for me, though. Not for a while, at least. Instead, I lie there staring up at the ceiling, thinking about tomorrow.

About my life.

About Ares.

He is *not* going to control me like some sort of fucking trophy wife or puppet. If he thinks he is, he's about to rue the day he agreed to this.

OH GOD, I feel like death.

I've kept the smile plastered on my face on for my family, and even for *his* family. I posed for a picture with Dimitra, Ares' grandmother, who rattled off a bunch of what seemed like nice things to me, though who knows, because it was all *literally* Greek to me.

I even managed to mumble a heartfelt apology to Castle for going all psycho on him. Luckily, he tells me it's all good and then messes up my hair. Bastard.

I've kept it together throughout the whole morning gong show of going to the Drakos mansion, where the wedding is being held, sitting through hair and makeup, all of that.

But now that I'm alone—just me and the dress in one of the guest rooms—I can feel the energy draining out of me.

Sitting in a robe, I turn to scowl at the white garment bag hanging by the window. Beyond it, I can see the admittedly gorgeous white wedding pergola festooned with about a billion white roses out in the garden.

Fuck, this is really happening.

There's a knock at the door.

"Yeah?"

The door opens, jolting me. But it's the man who steps through it that has my insides clenching and my heart twisting into knot.

I glare.

“You’re not supposed to see me before the wedding.”

“I’m not supposed to see you *in the dress* before the wedding.”

I shiver as his eyes slide over the short silk robe I’m wearing.

He clears his throat, and for the first time since he walked in, I realize he’s in a tuxedo.

Fuck. He looks *way* too good in a tuxedo.

“I apologize if I was harsh last night. It wasn’t that you went out—”

“Yeah, controlling much?”

He gives me a withering look.

“It’s that both of our families have a lot of enemies out there, none of whom are too pleased that we’re joining forces. I didn’t mean to be a dick, I was genuinely worried. It put me a little on edge. I’m sorry.”

I nod at his curiously heart-felt apology.

“Thank you. I’m sorry for the whiskey in your face. And…”

He nods. “And?”

I clear my throat. “And I’m sorry for puking on your shoes.”

“Thank you. But no, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

He chuckles quietly.

“So, are you ready to do this?”

“Not really.”

“Should I be wearing rubber boots?”

I smile thinly as I give him the finger.

“Hilarious.”

“Treat this seriously, Neve.”

“I will seriously consider that.”

He glares at me. “Again, the appearances of this matter.”

“Oh my God, I couldn’t agree more,” I gush. “You’re *so* right, Ares. And I think the appearance we should be giving off is chaste and wholesome. So, I think we should convert that home office of yours into a second bedroom for me.”

He smiles thinly.

“You know, in ancient Greece, men would often get their wives through the spoils of war—conquering them and fucking them for the first time on the very battlefield where their kin had just been slain.”

“And in old Celtic culture, women would *geld* the men who tried to lay hands on them without their permission.” I flash him a winning smile. “Just food for thought.”

Ares’ jaw grinds.

“When you’re married to me, you’ll be *mine*. And believe me, when I have you…” I shiver as he moves closer, that woodsy clean scent of his igniting little pockets of heat in me. “I won’t need to force you, *wife*.”

I swallow, not trusting myself to respond.

“Well.” Ares straightens and turns for the door. “See you soon.”

THE REST of it is a blurry haze of mumbled vows. An orthodox priest rattles things off in both English and Greek, and then the words tumble out that will seal my fate and join me forever to the dark, brooding, *gorgeous* but grim man standing before me.

“You may kiss the bride.”

My mouth tightens, lips pursing as Ares begins to lower his head to mine. I see the glint of steel in his eyes, and I shiver as he suddenly cups my face firmly. He drags his thumb over my bottom lip, all the while stabbing that lethal gaze of his into my eyes.

And it *does something* to me.

I flinch. Barely, and just for a moment. But it’s just enough, and my defenses fall for half a second.

It’s all he needs.

Instantly, his mouth crushes to mine in the most fierce, vicious, and punishing kiss of my entire life as he kisses the absolute *fuck* out of me. This isn’t a polite “you may kiss the bride” kiss. This is a “holy shit” type kiss.

My mind goes blank, and I swear I see stars.

Then it’s over.

We’re man and wife.

Forever.

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NEVE

IT'S A SMALL WEDDING, with only maybe thirty people in attendance—my family, the Drakos family, Owen and a few of his men, Ezio and a few of *his*, and a couple of other "business associates" of both families.

But the guest list could be *one* person, and it'd still be too big a wedding for me. And the reception following the ceremony is the icing on the cake.

Standing up there and marrying Ares, actually reciting vows and everything, was bad enough. But being paraded around in front of all of them at the reception in the ballroom of the Drakos estate is a whole new circle of hell.

Mostly, it's because it's all so disingenuous. People like Owen are coming up to me with bright smiling faces to congratulate me—as if this is actually is *real*. I feel like there was a part of this wedding where everyone drank the crazy koolaid, and I didn't get a cup.

So now here I am, improvising the part live on stage. And it's *exhausting*.

At least some of the guests are having fun. I grin when I look over to see Callie and Eilish whooping it up on the dance floor in front of the live jazz band hired for the event. Kratos—who's like six and a half feet tall—joins them, grinning as he fumbles his way through some dance moves.

Even Hades, god of death that he is, seems to be enjoying himself. Or, at least as much as I've ever seen.

Meanwhile there's me, the blushing bride, meandering through the small crowd trying to keep the plastic smile from falling off my face.

On the plus side, my hangover is pretty much gone, though I still wrinkle my nose and shake my head no whenever a waiter comes by and offers me a flute of champagne.

"There you are!"

I sigh, plastering the smile even more firmly onto my face as I turn to face Owen yet again. He grins a wide, ruddy-faced smile, raising the large glass of whiskey in his hands.

Well, at least someone's not too hungover to drink the Drakos family out of house and home.

"Your mother and father would be so proud of you, you know."

"Thanks, Owen."

"And you know? You're the *spitting* image of Sheila in white, with your hair up like that. Christ, she'd have loved to see you like this."

I smile quietly. Sheila was my maternal grandmother, who ended up having a torrid affair with Cillian's father, Brendan, which is how my father came to be. Sheila never actually married or anything, but Owen's always carried a bit of a torch for her, especially when he's been drinking.

"Well, Owen, I know if she were here today, she'd be plucking that glass out of your hand and asking you for a dance."

He grins widely. "Especially with your grandfather Brendan out of the picture. No offense."

I chuckle. “None taken.”

“Your father, God rest his soul, was a great man and a great friend. But *his* father?” Owen scowls. “A real asshole.”

I laugh when he shrugs and then gives me a hug.

“Forgive me, I’m drunk.”

“Good. Go have one for me.”

His brows shoot up as his gaze drops significantly to my stomach.

“*No way*,” I make a face. “Just had too many last night.”

“You know hangovers are like women, right?”

I roll my eyes. I’ve heard this joke before from him. But it still cracks me up.

“Best way to get over one is to get under a new one.”

“That doesn’t sound like the Yeats I know.”

I grin at Cillian’s voice and turn to see him arching a sharp brow at Owen. Owen just chuckles a wheezing laugh and claps him on the shoulder.

“Like any good true Irishman, I’m a fuckin’ poet when I’m in my cups.”

“Clearly. Do me a favor though and go recite to your cups elsewhere for a minute. I need to speak with my niece.”

Owen chuckles again, giving me one last hug before he shuffles off in the direction of the bar.

“I heard you really painted the town red last night.”

I groan. “Let’s just say mistakes were made.”

“Heard you painted Ares’ shoes, too.”

I make a face. Cillian just grins.

“I know congratulations are in order, but I’m willing to bet you’ll stab the next person who says it to you.”

“You have no idea.”

Cillian nods, then lowers his voice. “You know I’d never have agreed to this if I thought he was a bad man, right?” he murmurs.

I shrug, turning to scan the crowd when suddenly my eyes land on Ares. He’s across the ballroom, chatting with the lead singer while the rest of the band finishes up an instrumental piece.

The singer flashes Ares a grin, nodding before she turns back to the stage and slinks her way over to the mic.

“This next one is a request from the groom to his special lady of the hour. Mrs. Drakos, this one’s for you.”

Everyone around me claps and cheers, turning to smile at me and fawn all over me. I bite my tongue, waiting for whatever snarky bullshit Ares is about to toss at me via the band.

Until suddenly, they launch into “Sinnerman” by Nina Simone.

Which just happens to be one of my favorite songs *ever*.

I stand there speechless, my frown and the last traces of my hangover forgotten as I just listen, getting lost in the song. By the time she gets to the part about running to the river, I slowly turn, faltering as my eyes suddenly find Ares.

He’s looking right at me.

I frown quizzically. He just lifts a shoulder, the faintest hint of a smile curling the corners of his mouth up before he turns away.

Was that pure *luck*? Or does the man whom I know nothing about, who knows nothing about me, somehow know my favorite song?

And if he *does* know my favorite song, is it an olive branch to have the band play it, or is it just a preamble to him fucking with my head? A message to let me know I'm not as much of a stranger to him as I might like to think?

"Someone's done their homework."

I glance at my uncle. Judging from the set of his jaw and the way his green eyes seem to be dissecting Ares from across the room, I'm guessing I'm not the only one wondering if there's a deeper meaning to "Sinnerman" right now.

"You did just say he's a good man," I murmur, as the band tear their way through the song.

"I did. But I'll also add this." He turns, setting his drink down on a table next to us and putting his hands on my shoulders.

"If he ever *does* hurt you, or wrong you in anyway, if he's out there fucking other girls and creating a scandal for you, or talking ill of you to anyone. If he's even *unkind* to you…" His venomous green eyes glint dangerously. "I'll cut his throat, treaty or no treaty. I want you to know that."

I smile as I sink against my uncle and hug him tightly.

"I do know that."

He grunts, stiffly embracing me back. Which is more than I was expecting. Because Cillian is *not* one for showing much affection. And he's definitely

not a hugger.

When he pulls back, he gives me a curt nod. “Feel free to let Ares know that too.”

I grin. “I’ll be sure to pass along the message.”

Cillian lifts a brow, plucking his drink back up from the table before turning and wandering back into the crowd.

I exhale, grinning despite myself as I turn to watch the band. They’re absolutely *killing it* with this tune. And I’m having a blast watching Eilish and Callie spaz out on the dance floor.

“Neve Kildare?”

Goddammit.

My shoulders slump and the fake smile goes back onto my face as I turn to see who it is who wants to test my patience by giving me their congratulations *now*.

When I see who it is, I’m puzzled.

I don’t know the stoic man in the gray suit. In fact, I’m not sure I’ve actually seen him before at all, never mind today at the wedding.

“Hi, sorry,” I clear my throat as I extend my hand. “I’m not sure we’ve met __”

“*An Seiceadóir* says hello.”

The instant I hear the name, it’s like getting plunged under icy water as every nightmare I’ve had for the last fifteen years comes rushing back all at once.

Every terrified scream I uttered when I was locked in that shack all those years ago.

Every choked sob.

Every expectation each time I heard the snap of a twig under his boots outside, that I was about to die.

An Seiceadóir.

The Executioner.

My monster.

I go numb, and the world around me slows to a crawl as I watch the man raise his hand. I see the glint of the gun in that hand as it levels at my face.

And then suddenly, everything speeds back up again and I'm aware of something charging past me.

Not something. Some*one*.

A scream lodges in my choked throat as I watch Ares slam into the man. He shoves his hand up into the air, and the entire room explodes into chaos as the gun fires wildly into the ceiling.

In one fluid motion, his face utterly blank and focused, Ares whirls and with a muscled arm grabs the man around the neck from behind. He reaches back with his other hand, fingers curling around a steak knife from a place setting on the table behind him.

The knife flashes. The man in the choke hold who just had a gun to my head gurgles as his eyes go wide. And suddenly, his entire throat opens up in front of me, and a tsunami of blood floods down the front of his suit.

I just stare, unable to breathe, unable to even *blink* as Ares lets the body drop to the puddle of blood on the floor, dropping the knife down next to it.

Slowly, his eyes raise to mine.

No longer blank. This time, they're filled with a whirlwind of emotions.

Rage. Power. Vengeance.

And possessiveness.

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ARES

"I'VE GOT our top guys swarming the city," Hades growls. "We don't want to make a big deal about it, because we don't want to encourage any copycats or have anyone else with an axe to grind coming out of the woodwork. I've asked them to be discreet when they start kicking in doors and asking questions."

Hades looks furious. Which is interesting, because he's barely spoken more than five words in a row to Neve in his life, and has about as much interest in her—and our marriage—as he does in becoming a chaste pacifist.

It'd be very easy to chalk his rage up to the fact that someone managed to get past our security and bring a gun into our home. But it's more than that. When he glances at Neve, there's a flicker of the same sort of anger I saw on his face once when some guy tried to grab Callie's ass at a gala event.

It's the look of a brother who's fucking *pissed* that someone just tried to mess with his sister. And that's an interesting development.

But if he's pissed, I'm fucking *livid*.

Yes, I'm angry that someone got past our guys. I'm furious that a gun was brought into my family's home and used in violence.

But more than that, someone tried to shoot Neve. And that's brought a beast out in me I absolutely did *not* expect.

I turn to Kratos. "I want to know how the fuck that piece of shit got through our security. And I want to know yesterday."

My brothers nod curtly and march away to dive into their orders.

Castle glances at me. "Our people will do the same. I've got some men in Queens I trust who I can run it by. If something like this is ordered in this city, they'll know about it."

I nod. He nods back, turning to leave before stopping to glance back at me.

"And thank you, Ares."

When he's gone, I turn to scan the room, and my eyes land on Neve. The whole reception is on lockdown, and she's sitting huddled with Cillian, her sister, and Callie at a table across the room. I start to go to her, when a hand lands on my arm.

"Got a second?"

I turn to the young blonde British woman behind me.

"Of course."

Interestingly, I first met Elsa Guin while sitting *across* the table from her, at a legal meeting my late brother Atlas once demanded with Rose, the girl he eventually died trying to steal. Elsa was there as Rose's father's attorney.

At the time, she was the best lawyer in the UK. And when the shit hit the fan with Atlas, I head-hunted her as fast as I could. Technically, since moving to New York, she's a partner at Crown and Black, a leading law firm here in the city. But she's also the de facto personal attorney for my family.

And right now, she's here on damage control.

"Where are we at?"

"The band knows the score—no pun intended. I'm pretty sure this isn't the first time they've played a party for a family like yours and had something like this go down. They'll be silent. But you're going to be paying them six times the rate that was originally agreed upon for the night."

"That's fine."

Her smirk says that it wasn't a suggestion.

"I've spoken to the rest of the guests who aren't Drakos or Kildare family and had them all sign NDAs." She taps violently on her phone. "I'm emailing you a list of any guests that might be potential weak points, though."

"No one's going to talk."

She shrugs. "I find being overprepared is better than scrambling for lifeboats after someone blows a hole in the hull of the ship."

"Fair enough."

"Now, as for the body…"

She turns, clearing her throat uncomfortably as her gaze lands on the bloodstained tablecloth covering the dead man who attacked Neve. Elsa's face pales slightly, and I watch her throat muscles go up and down as she tries to swallow a lump caught in it.

Elsa's ambitious. And I think maybe a bit of a thrill-seeker. But even with the obscene amount money I pay her for her services, no one as squeaky clean and incredibly driven as she is would ever easily work for a crime

family. She’s dived into the deep end of our world well. Even so, I can tell all of this is a bit much for her.

“It’ll be dealt with.”

She winces. “And I never heard that.”

“Heard what?”

She smirks, nodding. “Right. Well. That’s it from my end, then.”

“Thank you, Ms. Guin,” I mutter.

“My pleasure. And, needless to say, I was never here today.”

“And we’re all deeply saddened that you were unable to attend the wedding.”

She smiles wryly. “Speak to you soon, Mr. Drakos. And congratulations.”

Congratulations on your sham wedding.

Elsa collects her files and heads for the elevator. Then I turn, leveling my eyes on Neve.

Neve, who could have died today.

Neve, who’s looking frailer and more shaken than I’ve ever seen her before. Or ever knew she even *could* look.

Before I know it, I’m moving across the floor towards her. Cillian glances up at me. He nods, standing, and wordlessly clamps a hand on my shoulder. I can read the “thank you for saving my niece” in his fierce look.

I drag my eyes to Neve and clear my throat.

“We’re leaving. Now.”

I expect a fight. Or a “fuck you” of some kind. But she just looks up at me and nods.

“Okay.”

She turns and hugs her sister, then mine. And then she’s up, even taking my offered arm as we turn and move for the elevators.

“Where are we going?”

“Home,” I growl, shrugging off my jacket and draping it over her shoulders. “We’re going home.”

WHEN WE GET BACK to the penthouse and the door closes behind us, she finally relaxes. Her shoulders drop, my jacket slips from them, and I can see color coming back to her face.

Good, good. But now I want answers.

Of *course* I’m concerned about the security breach. And the fact that Neve just had a gun shoved in her face, and that I just slit a man’s throat in front of her—the evidence of which is still splattered across my shirt and her wedding gown.

But the entire Kildare clan has been *silent* on the biggest elephant in the room, which is who that fucker was and why he was even there in the first place. Why did he march right over to Neve? And what the fuck did he say to her to make her look so stricken just before I bolted over and knocked his shot into the ceiling?

“Who was that?”

Her back is to me, and I can see the way the question makes her stiffen again—the way the muscles under the exposed creamy skin where the dress plunges down her back tighten and ripple.

“I don’t know.”

“Interesting. He seemed to know you.”

“*Well* I *don’t know him*!” she snaps, whirling on me.

Her face is pale. Her eyes have a manic look to them, like fear incarnate is simmering just under the surface. And it’s not just fear at of what just happened. It’s deeper than that, more fundamental.

She’s terrified right now. Of—what?

“Neve, what did he say to you right before I—”

“I *don’t know*.”

“I mean he was three feet in front of you. You didn’t hear what he—”

“I don’t remember! *Okay*?!”

My mouth clamps shut, and my jaw tenses.

“Fine.”

“Am I still being interrogated, or can I go change out of my blood-soaked wedding dress now?”

I exhale slowly. “Go ahead.”

“*Thank you so much*.”

She turns and marches down the hall to the bedroom. I take a moment, and I consider making myself a much-needed drink. But then I glance down and grimace at the sight of my shirt.

Yeah, I should change too.

I unbutton the blood-stained shirt and remove it as I pad down the hall after her. Inside my room, she jumps a little when she hears me come in. She's focused on the clasp at the back of her gown, but she snaps her head around when I enter.

"Do you fucking mind?"

"You do understand, this is *my* room too?"

"Well, can I get some privacy for one freaking second?"

My jaw grinds.

"Do you need a hand?"

"No! I need some fucking *privacy*!"

I sigh.

Fine.

Without a word, I turn and step into the bathroom, shutting the door behind me before sinking against it.

Should have made that drink.

I pull the rest of my clothes off and wrap a towel around my waist. At the white marble vanity, I wash my hands in the sink, the wheels in my head turning as I watch the blood on my hands slowly turn the water pink as it swirls down the drain.

Christ, what a day.

Turning, I'm about to reach to start the shower when suddenly I hear a screech from the bedroom.

My body reacts on impulse, yanking the door open before I bolt into the room, ready to destroy with my bare hands whoever's followed us here.

But there's no one else in the room. It's just Neve, swearing loudly with her arms bent awkwardly behind her back, still struggling with the clasp of her dress.

And suddenly, *all* I can think about is the single taste of her lips I had at the altar.

Sweet. Soft. Defiant, and yet holy mother of Christ so inviting.

With her back to me and fussing as she is, she clearly hasn't heard me come back into the bedroom. And I don't change that. I don't say a word, I just move towards her. And it's not until my fingers brush hers that she gasps and jolts suddenly.

"*I—*"

"Just shut up and let me help."

She stiffens, and I can practically hear her brain scrolling through a list of her favorite swears or insults to throw at me. But she slowly lets go of the dress, lets her hands drop to her sides. I grab the stuck clasp in my fingers, twist hard, and yank down.

The back of the dress goes loose as it opens.

"Thank—"

She shivers as my fingers slide to the zipper hidden beneath the clasp, grasping it, slowly starting to pull it down.

"Ares, I can…"

She trails off as I keep going—silent, my eyes glued to her back as more and more of her creamy flesh is exposed to my eyes. My jaw grinds as my cock begins to thicken to steel beneath the towel around my waist.

The zipper stops at the small of her back, and I watch her shiver. My fingers slip underneath the two halves of the back of her dress, pushing them apart as they slip from her shoulders. She gasps quietly, and her hands dart up to stop the fabric from falling from her breasts.

I give the two halves of the dress a small tug. Not yanking it, but making my intentions clear.

Neve drops her hands.

The dress falls away.

And there's no fucking going back now.

The dress pools at her feet, leaving her gasping quietly, her back to me, in just a pair of lacy white thong panties. *Bridal* panties. My hands slide slowly over her hips, relishing the way her body trembles under my touch. The way her skin is so fucking soft and warm. The way she whimpers almost silently as I slowly turn her.

And when we are facing each other, I move into her, our bodies pressing together as the hard points of her nipples drag against my bare chest. Her eyes go wide as she looks up into mine—those green orbs of hers swirling with both defiance and lust. With both vitriol and need. Like she's trying to decide if she's going to kiss me or fucking stab me.

I make the decision for her.

In one motion, I cup her jaw, lift her mouth to mine, and sear my lips to hers in the single most possessive, consuming kiss of my life.

There’s *definitely* no going back now.

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NEVE

THE FIRST KISS at the altar was vicious and fierce, as if Ares was making a point. Claiming me. It was punishing, and decisive, and yes, it made my heart skip and my pulse run hot.

But it's this second kiss that turns my blood to fire and has my toes curling against the floor as the world explodes around me. Because this one isn't about proving a point. It's pure, possessive, consuming, incendiary *need*.

Our mouths crash together, and I whimper when his tongue delves past my lips to dance with mine. I shiver as my body melts against his, the roaring heat of his skin and the rippling power of his muscles turning me into a puddle as I moan into the kiss.

His hands cup my face and grip my hip possessively, pinning my pelvis to his and making me shiver when I feel the throb of the bulge beneath his towel. His tongue tastes and explores my mouth as my hands claw at his chest, as if I desperately need to be even closer to his body than I already am.

And sweet *Jesus*, his body. I've seen it from afar, back when he was merely my dangerous enemy of a neighbor without curtains. But up close, it's insanely magnificent.

Mere humans aren’t built like this. *Gods* are built like this.

I shiver, moaning into his mouth as my palms press to his rock-hard chest. He growls, his grip on me tightening, his tongue even more demanding as my fingertips trace down the grooves of his abs to the chiseled lines of his hips. My pulse thuds wildly, and pure lust explodes within my core as my fingers pluck eagerly at the towel around his waist.

Suddenly, I’m gasping as he spins us and shoves me down to the bed. I whimper as he crawls after me, his fierce, dark eyes like cold daggers dragging nakedly over my skin, his razor-sharp jaw grinding with lust and need and his shoulders rippling as he moves over me.

The towel falls away, and there’s no way I can even attempt to stop my eyes from dropping down between us.

Where they immediately just about pop right out of my head.

Holy. *Fuck.*

I’ve seen him naked from seventy feet away. But it’s not like he was ever *hard* when I was peeping at him while he was sipping his morning coffee.

Well, he is now.

Oh my God is he hard now. And Ares is freaking *huge*. Like “how the fuck is that going to even fit inside of me” huge. Thick, swollen, gorgeous, making me shiver as it pulses against my thigh.

“A little bigger when it’s not viewed from across the street, huh?”

“Uh, *yeah.*…”

Shit.

I blush fiercely as my eyes snap to his and take in the cocky smirk on his face. Quickly, I force myself to scowl back at him.

Like hell am I giving Ares Drakos the satisfaction of seeing me drool all over his dick—metaphorically speaking, of course.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did you want me to stroke your ego and tell you how *big and hard* your dick—”

He rocks his hips, letting his swollen cock drag hotly against my pussy through my panties, which are getting embarrassingly wet. And no force on earth could stop the pathetic whimper that falls from my lips.

“Sorry, what was that? I didn’t quite catch that.”

I open my mouth to throw something sharp and biting back at him. But then the fucker does it again, grinding his huge cock against my now-completely-slick panties, making the lacy material rub electrically against my clit.

Which of course, makes me moan. *Again*.

“Now, what exactly were you saying about my big, hard dick?” he growls thickly, lowering his mouth to my neck.

“I wasn’t—*fuck*!”

The fucker fucking *bites* me—hard. I’ve never had that happen to me before.

…And I *really* like it.

A lot.

Pleasure hums through my core and heat pools between my thighs as he does it again, raking his teeth over the tender skin and dragging another

deep moan from my chest.

Ares moves lower, nipping at my collarbone and making me whimper. Then even lower, the wild contrast between the scruff of his stubble and the smoothness of his lips on my skin pebbling it to goosebumps.

He moves down over my left breast, and I gasp, shivering and moaning when his lips suddenly wrap around my aching nipple.

Which he promptly nips with his teeth.

"*Fuck—*"

"That's the plan."

I shudder, my breath catching as I drop my hooded gaze to where he's looking up at me from my breast.

He keeps his eyes locked with mine as he lowers his mouth again to my nipple. His tongue slowly and sensually swirls around the dusky pink tip, making my face cave with pleasure before he suddenly nips it with his teeth again.

I hiss, groaning both in pleasure and annoyance that I'm giving him the satisfaction of knowing he's turning me into such a puddle. I twist under him, clenching my jaw tighter as his tongue slips from one nipple across my skin to the other.

"Clamp that mouth shut all you like, princess," he growls against my skin. "Squeeze your eyes shut, look away, try your level best to occupy your mind with something else. You can lie to yourself all you want, but your body gives you the fuck away."

"Fuck you, it does—*oh*…"

His hand slides down to grab my ass possessively before giving it firm swat just as he tongues my nipple again.

“Please continue,” he murmurs darkly. “I think I love it even more when your mouth lies while your body begs for more.”

“You *arrogant* son of a—”

My body jolts, arching from the bed in pure ecstasy as his thumb drags down my slit through my panties. He does it again, and there’s no stopping the aching moans that fall from my lips.

His mouth begins to slide down my body, his tongue, lips, and teeth leaving marks down my skin as my stomach quivers beneath his touch—lower and lower, until my eyes bulge as I feel his fingers curl into the waistband of my panties.

I stiffen, shivering as my hands jerk down to grab his hair.

“You’re used to a certain kind of girl—”

“Exactly what sort of girl do you think I’m used to?” he growls into the skin of my hip, his eyes sliding up my body to lock with mine.

I smile sarcastically.

“Submissively obedient, willing to do whatever it takes just to have a chance to be near the *great* Ares Drakos.”

His brow cocks, an arrogant smirk on his lips.

“Are you done?”

“Not even close. I’m just getting started. I’m guessing air-headed? Vapid? No real opinions for themselves because that would get in the way?”

Ares sighs, aching his brow.

“Primped, glamorous, all dolled up at every hour of the day, *waxed*—”

My face burns the second I say it.

In hindsight, I’m not sure *what* I expected for my wedding night. But suffice to say, crazy as it sounds, they didn’t entail getting laid.

It’s a mistake I’m suddenly regretting, now that I’m with Mr. Sex God himself, with the perfect body, and the honed muscles, and the ridiculously gorgeous cock, who is—*I’m sure*—used to girls who fall into his bed looking *perfect*, with smooth legs and waxed pussies.

Which…isn’t me.

I mean, yeah, I shaved my legs this morning. And it’s not like I’ve gone full cavewoman down there. But let’s just say I’m not exactly in a position to wear a bikini right now.

Ares arches a brow as he lifts his gaze to mine.

“I…I mean…” my face burns hotly as he slowly lowers his eyes to my panties, right in front of his face.

“I—”

Without warning, he drops his mouth to my hip and *bites*.

“*Fuck*…” I whimper, jolting and gasping in pleasure. And before I can stop him, because I’m still shuddering from the dangerously sexy feel of his teeth against my hip, his fingers slip into my panties and yank them down to mid-thigh.

I blush fiercely as he takes in the soft reddish-ginger hair. He licks his lips, and slowly, his eyes drag back up to mine.

“Do you really think I’m scared of a little fire?

With a low growl, his mouth drops between my legs. And when his tongue delves between my slick folds, my whole world melts around me.

"*Oh fuuuuck…*"

Ares groans as he drags his tongue up and down my slit, turning me to putty under his mouth. He slides his tongue higher, and when his lips wrap around my throbbing clit, and hum against it, I cry out as my body lifts from the bed.

I shudder in pleasure as he tongues my aching bud—mercilessly, like he's dominating my clit, demanding submission. He swirls the tip of his tongue around it, teasing it until I'm gasping and clawing at the bedsheets as my hips raise eagerly to his mouth.

Ares yanks my panties the rest of the way off and then shoves my knees back and apart, lewdly spreading me open to his hungry gaze. His mouth delves back between my thighs, and I cry out when his tongue plunges into me.

His palm smacks my ass—once, twice, three times—until I'm shaking and shuddering and *so fucking close* to coming it feels like I'm going to explode into a million pieces.

Which is exactly when he *stops*.

I choke, eyes bulging and brow furrowing in protest as he pulls away from my pussy.

"What…but…"

My face burns hotly as he slides up my body, smirking at me arrogantly.

"Yes?"

"*Asshole*," I groan. "I…"

I clamp my mouth shut, shivering as I glance down to see him wrap a hand around his thick, meaty cock as he spreads my knees wide.

“You were saying?”

I swallow, ripping my gaze back up to him.

“*Yes*?” he growls, that smirk still on his face.

“I was—*oh fuck*…” I whimper as I feel the large, swollen, silky head of his cock slip between my lips, teasing against my opening.

“You were saying?”

I groan as I glare up at him. “I was *close*,” I mumble.

“Good.”

“What the fuck do you—”

Oh. My. GOD.

He slides into me—every. Single. Thick. Inch of him, in one smooth, powerful thrust.

My eyes roll back. My body clenches.

And suddenly, I’m coming, harder than I ever have in my entire life, by a fucking country *mile*.

It’s like leaving earth. It’s like every cell in my body comes apart and ignites like fiery embers all at the same time. An out-of-body experience. Ego death. Entering a new dimension.

Oh, forget the flowery fucking metaphors—I’m having the biggest, most explosive orgasm I’ve *ever* had. And it’s literally just from him entering me.

Suddenly, his mouth is crushing against mine, and before I know it, I'm kissing him back, desperately. My arms start to encircle his neck, but he grips my wrists and shoves them back onto the bed, pinning them there as he hovers over me.

I moan, straining against his grip as the aftershocks of my orgasm flicker like mini explosion through my core.

"Wrap your legs around my hips," he orders.

I want to defy him, because, well, that seems to be our thing: he tells me to do something, I tell him no in creatively crude ways.

Except now, it's like he's flipped a switch in me. He's reached in deep within me and turned off the defiance.

And all I want is for him to keep making me feel like he just did.

I shiver as my legs wrap around his muscled, grooved hips, my ankles locking at his back.

"*Good girl*."

Fuck.

I whimper, shuddering as his cock flexes deep inside of me. His hips begin to pull back. I moan as I drop my gaze to where we are connected, staring in awe as every inch of his slick, glistening cock eases from my eager pussy, until just the swollen head is lodged inside.

My eyes raise to his, and I shiver at the intensity I see there—holding my gaze, captivating me. All of me.

And then he drives into me, *hard*.

I cry out, my thighs squeezing his hips as my eyes roll back. I moan in sheer unadulterated pleasure as he does it again and again, until his hips begin to roll like pistons, pounding his huge, gorgeous cock in and out of me as I come apart beneath him.

Ares groans, *loudly*, and God is it hot. He does it again, hissing in pleasure as his mouth drops to the crook of my neck.

"*Fuck* does your pretty pussy feel so fucking good milking my cock."

My eyes roll back again, my pulse hammering in my ears as he fucks me into the mattress. We start to move faster, both of our hips rolling and rocking against the other's, harder and more violently. I moan wildly, my arm muscles straining against his grip, desperately needing to touch him right now.

But he keeps them pinned hard to the bed, and the unrelenting power and strength to his grip forcing my submission is like a drug, a hit of pure dopamine to my frontal cortex I've never felt before.

Ares' hips move faster, fucking me even harder as my own body shifts to take him deeper. Our bodies grind together, skin slick with heat and sweat. My moans fill the room, his savage, primal grunts filling my ears as we start to *fuck*.

Not make love. Not sleep together. Not even have sex.

This is *fucking*. Like animals. Like gods.

And holy *fuck*, is it good.

"That's it. Keep milking my cock with that greedy little pussy, princess," he rasps into my ear. "Squeeze my big dick with your little cunt. *Harder. Tighter*. I want your pussy begging for my cum."

I’m going to explode. Or have a heart attack. Or both. And as we race headlong into oblivion, my entire body begins to coil and clench, until my vision blurs and starts to go white.

“*You’re going to make me fucking come in you so fucking hard, princess*.”

For one split second, I have a flash of clarity.

“*Wait*!” I blurt just as I teeter on the edge. “I—I’m not on any birth—”

“*Good*.”

Sweet. Fucking. *God*.

It’s the animalistic, caveman possessiveness in his rough, groaned voice in my ear. It’s that simple response to my worry of not being on the pill —*“Good”*.

That is the lit match that drops on the pool of gasoline boiling in my core. And when it catches, my whole world *explodes*.

All I see is white. All I feel is pure ecstasy shattering through every nerve in my body as I absolutely shatter. My body arches and my hips rock up from the bed, my arms still pinned fast as the orgasm detonates through me.

Ares groans, biting down hard on my neck as he drives his fat cock deep inside and lets go. I can feel him throbbing and pumping violently, what feels like gallons of his hot cum spilling into me as my vision blurs and the air leaves my body.

Dimly, I’m aware of his lips on my neck, gently kissing where his teeth just marked me. I’m aware of his hands letting go of my wrists, even though I can’t even move now. I’m aware of his mouth teasing up my jawline before his lips hungrily find mine.

What. The. Fuck. Was. That.

That wasn’t fucking. That was a religious experience. That was looking into infinity, coming face-to-face with a higher power.

That was sex like I didn’t remotely know it could be.

I shiver as I feel him ease his cock out of me. Fuck, am I going to be sore tomorrow.

Worth it.

Ares slowly stands, rolling his shoulder and his neck. And of course, seeing as I’m helpless to move, all I do is stare—hungrily—at his ripped physique. My eyes drop, and I blush when I realize I’m starring wolfishly at his still very hard, glistening cock with a single drop of white cum beading at the tip.

“You keep looking at me like that and I’ll have no choice but to fuck you again.”

My cheeks burn, my lip catching in my teeth as my eyes snap to his. But I groan, shaking my head.

“Yeah, do you *want* me to have a heart attack? Cause that’s how I’ll have a heart attack.”

He grins. “Good heart attack or bad heart attack?”

“Is there such a thing as a *good* heart attack?”

“You tell me.”

I grin, chewing on my lip. “Yeah, there is.”

Because whatever the hell that just was? Yeah, it was good. *Very*, very good.

Ares grins that slightly arrogant, smug smile back at me. Which, I hate to admit, is in a weird way growing on me. Like, it's becoming charming.

Yikes, self.

I clear my throat as I gingerly sit up on the edge of the bed and reach for my panties.

Ares kicks them away.

"Um, excuse me?"

He smirks at me.

"You won't be needing them."

I roll my eyes. "Well, thank you so much for making that decision for me."

"No problem. Now, which side do you like to sleep on?"

I tense.

I was wondering when we'd get to this. Because this sharing a bed thing is my line. Or rather, it's just *over* my line.

I'll say the vows without really meaning them. I'll wear his ring, and be his wife, and I'll do…well, what we just did—willingly, at that, because *damn*.

But sharing a bed seems too…intimate. Too real. Too far over the line for a fake arrangement.

"I think…I'm actually going to sleep on the couch."

Ares' brows knit.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm—"

“I fucking *heard* you,” he growls. “I’d like to know *why*.”

I shrug, meeting his gaze.

“Because.”

Fire flares in his eyes.

“Because fucking *what*, Neve.”

“Because I just want to, okay?”

“No, actually,” he snaps back. “Not okay. You’re my fucking wife.”

“Oh, come *on*.”

He glares at me.

“We have an agreement, Neve.”

“Yes, we do. In public, I’ll be your wife—”

“In private, too, it would seem.”

I simmer, remnants of the pleasure I just felt flickering through my core even as I glare at him.

“That was…basic human needs.”

“*M-hmm*,” he mutters dryly.

Well, this is going nowhere.

I stand, turning and grabbing a pillow from the huge bed before I start to yank the comforter off it.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

“I told you: to sleep on the couch.”

“The hell you are.”

“*Watch me*.”

He suddenly grabs my wrist, but I yank myself free of his grip, whirling to him.

“This isn’t *real* between us, Ares!”

His eyes narrow dangerously. “The vows you spoke say otherwise. So does your swollen cunt with my cum still dripping from it.”

My jaw drops, my eyes going wide as my face turns crimson. I start to say something. But no words come, so I just snap my mouth shut instead and turn on my heel to leave the room.

“So, let me make sure I have this correctly. In public, you’re my wife. And in private, you’re just my whore?”

I spin on a dime, and before I can stop myself, my palm is connecting hard with his cheek.

Shit. That was a mistake.

Ares’ jaw clenches, and his eyes burn with lethal fire. His lips curl as he goes to grab me, but I slap his hand away.

“As your *whore*, this is me fulfilling the contract and *leaving* afterwards. Goodnight, *asshole*,” I spit, whirling. But I pause, turning back to him, hurling a murderous glance his way.

“And happy fucking wedding day.”

I turn and storm from the bedroom, taking my pillow and the comforter.

Ares slams the door shut behind me.

Fuming, I stomp into his living room and shove the comforter and pillow onto the couch before wrapping myself in them.

Happy fucking wedding day, indeed.

And yet even though I'm furious, now that I'm alone, my mind doesn't focus on what an asshole he just was. And, if I'm being honest, what an asshole *I* maybe just was, with my abrupt shut down.

It focuses on what happened before all of that. On the part where that man down the hall made my body feel a level of pleasure I know for an absolute fact I've never felt before. To the part where I just had—by far—the best sex of my life. Like, re-evaluate your definition of the word orgasm.

I chew on my lip, simmering as I sink further into the folds of the comforter. My thigh clench, and a slickness coats them as my skin rubs together. In the darkness of Ares' living room, my traitorous hand snakes down my body between my legs. I turn my head, muffling my moans in the pillow as I start to rub my clit.

I'm still sore from the complete and utter fucking Ares gave me earlier. But the need for another release is all-consuming. My fingers roll over my clit, rubbing faster and harder as I squirm, replaying every lurid detail and remembering every filthy thing he growled into my ear earlier. Until I can't stand it any longer.

I cry out into the pillow, my body twisting and shuddering on the couch as I come against my hand. It's nowhere *near* what I felt with Ares.

But it scratches the itch.

Sort of.

When the aftershocks fade, I slump under the comforter, inhaling and exhaling heavily as I stare up at the ceiling.

Slowly, as the pleasure of my release fades, so do the heated thoughts of the man down the hall. And instead, my thoughts turn darker, more twisted, more terrifying, as they begin to focus on another.

On the monster.

I flinch, shivering as I relive the moment earlier today when a gun was leveled at my face. As I hear again the words hissed from the man's mouth.

An Seiceadóir says hello.

An Seiceadóir.

The Executioner.

The man who's haunted my nightmares for fifteen years. The man who ripped me from my world and shoved me into the dark, dank blackness of that shack in the woods.

The Lord sees and loves you, little one. Your sacrifice will carry the souls of the wicked to hell, and give light to all the angels' wings…

With a choke, I flinch, bolting upright on the couch. I gulp, panting, my skin turning to goosebumps as my eyes dart around the huge penthouse.

Don't be silly. You're safe here. He can't get you here.

Earlier, Cillian asked me what the man said to me. I bullshitted and said it was just "I'm going to kill you". I've been trying to figure out why I lied ever since.

Now, I think I know.

If I can pretend the man with the gun today *didn't* say what he said, than it's not him. It's not my monster somehow reaching out to me from the pit they

threw him into. It's just another nightmare, terrifying but unreal, like the ones I get all the time.

But if that man really said that…if he *actually* looked me in the eye and told me "the executioner says hello", then I have *far* bigger problems than a fake mafia marriage to Ares Drakos.

I swallow, huddling into myself as my eyes drift across the living room and into the hallway leading down to Ares' room.

Suddenly, I wish I'd just stayed in there, in his bed, with him.

Sleep doesn't come quickly, and it's well past midnight when it finally overtakes me. When it does, it comes with darkness. And fear.

And the memories of the monster.

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ARES

THE DAY AFTER THE WEDDING, there's a big sit-down breakfast-slash-strategy discussion thing at the Kildare home—a stunning, stately six-story brownstone on the Upper East Side, just off Central Park.

Nico Drakos isn't the only one who jumped at the opportunity to seize his piece of the American Dream.

Lachlan Kildare, Cillian's great-grandfather, made his coin the old-fashioned way: by carving it out of the ground one blood-soaked inch at a time, and occasionally cracking a few skulls.

Lachlan came from a long line of Irishmen who'd clawed their way out of the Five Points in what became Lower Manhattan back when the whole city was basically run by warring tribes—Irish, English, Scot, Italian, even some Greeks. But he, like Nico Drakos, was a smart motherfucker.

When Lachlan's crew took over a block, or started working a protection racket for a new shop or factory, he didn't gamble the money away or spend it on women and booze. At least, not all of it. He was smart enough to stick most of it into the stock market, where he made an absolute fucking *killing* on metal commodities when WWI broke out.

But when the economy tanked on Black Tuesday, kicking off the Great Depression, Lachlan lost it all.

So he did the only logical thing a man could do.

He robbed a US Treasury building.

At least, that's the rumor. But it's the only way to explain him losing literally everything, and then suddenly having enough money to buy an entire building in the ritziest neighborhood in the city, during a world-wide economic catastrophe, with *cash*, no less.

Whatever the actual story is, the Kildare residence is fucking beautiful. I mean yeah, where I grew up is literally an English country manor, moved brick by brick to New York. But this place screams old money. Dark wood, bronze and marble everywhere, exquisite old-school craftsmanship. It's Gilded Age perfection, and I'm frankly more than a little envious.

Neve and I arrive in a chauffeured black SUV—bulletproof, after the shit that went down yesterday—with an armed escort in the car behind us.

We ride in silence. In fact, she's barely said shit to me since last night. And in the silence, I sit in the back seat of the SUV replaying every filthy detail of our first night together as husband and wife.

Goddamn, what a night. I've never once fucked like that, ever. I mean, I do usually play on the rougher side. But there's something about Neve's defiance, or the way she throws shit back in my face, or maybe it's just the way she seems utterly unfazed by me, that brings out the fucking animal in me.

Fucking her was…*raw*, and wild. And unlike any woman I've ever known before. Being with Neve was like combining two radioactive elements and watching the explosion.

And honestly, I'm fucking *hooked* now.

It's like every single inch of her was custom-built to hit every single button I have—even the ones I didn't know about.

Her soft, lithe body, curved in *all* the right places. Creamy skin, dotted with freckles. An ass I could—and absolutely plan to—sink my fucking teeth into. Tits perfect for my hands and my lips. A mouth begging to be tamed, or silenced with my own. Or *fucked*, like the bad girl she is.

And her pussy…*Christ*.

A vagina has no business being that fucking perfect, like it was tailor-made to snugly squeeze my cock to within an inch of his life. Every thrust was a fight to hang on tight, not to give in and come too soon because it felt so fucking good.

In short, by the time we arrive at the Kildare residence in utter silence, I'm hard as a fucking rock again.

Inside, Neve immediately leaves, wandering off into the house, saying something about finding her sister. Minutes later, as Cillian and I are beginning to discuss strategy and how we're going to proceed after yesterday's attack, Hades arrives, followed directly by Kratos and Calliope.

Callie gives me the briefest of nods before heading upstairs to find Neve and Eilish. Hades clears his throat, his face lined, angry, and tired as he sweeps his gaze over the rest of us. He's been up all night with a couple of carloads of Drakos men, quietly dropping in on any poor bastard he thinks might have any knowledge about yesterday's attack.

"Seriously, no one's got anything?" he growls.

Cillian clears his throat. "Things are in motion."

“Things are *in motion*?” my brother snaps. “I’ve been out all fucking night kicking in doors and busting heads, and you’ve got *things in motion*?! The fuck is *that* supposed to mean?”

I glare at him.

“*Easy*,” I hiss.

Cillian smiles, and I’m struck again by the venomous emerald glint in his eyes—that sort of weird, psycho off-kilter way he always seems to be looking *through* people, not at them.

I’m not gonna lie. I might not be *scared of* Cillian, necessarily. But he still creeps the fuck out of me.

“It means,” Cillian growls quietly. “That things are in *motion*. Should I choose to divulge more, I will. If not?” His lips curl dangerously in the corners. “Then you’ll shut your fucking mouth and not ever speak to me in that way again, or I’ll cut your tongue out and have it fried up with my morning eggs. Do we understand each other?”

Hades looks like he wants to keep this shit up, even with me glaring venom at him. Luckily, a subtle kick to the shin from Kratos, standing next to him, shakes him into reality.

“I...didn’t sleep much,” Hades mutters.

Cillian clears his throat. Apparently, that’ll suffice as an apology.

“Breakfast is laid out in the conservatory upstairs. There’s even *coffee*, for those of us who stayed up a little past their bedtime,” he adds pointedly, smiling thinly at Hades.

Thankfully, my brother ignores the bait.

We all follow Cillian upstairs, where I peel off to use the bathroom. After I'm done and I'm exiting, shaking my hands dry, I suddenly run right into a wall.

Or rather, a wall runs right into me. A blond, ticked-the-fuck-off wall.

I grit my teeth, snarling as Castle grabs me by the collar and slams me into a wall.

"You'll want to take your hands off me two fucking seconds ago," I hiss.

"Yeah?" he snaps viciously, glaring death at me. "You don't like it when people lay hands on you?"

I frown.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"What's *wrong* with me?!" He snarls, shoving close. "What's *wrong* with me is you laying your fucking hands on Neve."

My brows knit as I stare at him in complete confusion.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Married less than twenty-four fucking hours, and you're already smacking her around?" His lips curl into a snarl. "And then you have the audacity to show up here thinking I'm not going fucking kill you for it?"

Okay, I'm *seriously* confused.

"First," I snap, "you *need* to remove your fucking hands from me. Second, I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about."

I frown. Fuck. Is this her next bright idea? Lie to her overprotective bodyguard that I've been hitting her, so he'll come break my knees?

“Did Neve say something to you?”

“She didn’t have to,” Castle spits. “I fucking saw the marks you left on her, motherfucker.”

I frown in puzzlement. “The *marks* I left on—”

I freeze, and suddenly, it’s taking all my power not to grin.

“Her neck,” I mutter quietly. “You saw marks on her neck.”

Castle’s face goes livid. “Damn right I did. And if you think that’s fucking *funny*—”

“Maybe it’d be best if you stopped sticking your nose into what two married consenting adults do behind closed doors.”

He blinks. And then suddenly, the lightbulb goes on over his head. He makes a face, wrinkling his nose as his hands suddenly drop from my shirt.

“Huh.”

“Yeah, *huh*,” I mutter back, adjusting my collar.

Castle glares at me. I smile thinly back.

“What’s the matter, Castle? Jealous?”

I doubt it. But this is something I’ve been wondering about, and I have to know. Fake or not, Neve is my fucking *wife* now. And I’d very much like to know if the burly, fairly handsome motherfucker who’s been protecting her all these years has been doing so merely because it’s his job, or because he wants to get in her panties.

I have my answer instantly, though, when his face scrunches up in obvious distaste.

“Christ, *no*, you fuckin’ pervert. I was just concerned because she’s basically my kid sister.”

I push the point.

“You positive? Sure it’s not a little crush, Castle? Not the teensiest bit jealous that I got to go places you’ve only—”

He snaps, more viciously than I was expecting. I grunt as he his hands wrap around my neck, slamming me back against the wall.

“You’re talking about a woman who is basically *my sister*,” he snarls. “So shut the fuck up and show a little fucking respect, you deviant little fuck—”

“Castle?”

He stiffens, both of us yanking our heads around to see Eilish standing there, staring at us like we’ve both gone insane.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing.”

Castle’s hands drop from my neck. He clears his throat as he steps away from me.

“Nothing, Eils. Just a friendly disagreement.”

“*Friendly*?” Her voice is dripping with sarcasm.

I shrug.

“Yep, completely friendly,” Castle mutters.

“Okay, well, my uncle is looking for both of you. So…come get some breakfast.”

She gives Castle a strange look before turning and disappearing again around the corner.

“You’re a fucking asshole, you know that?” he grunts at me.

“Oh, so it’s the *younger* sister you’ve got a hard-on for—”

This time, I’m ready for him and I dodge the wild haymaker he throws at me—barely, I’ll grant him that. I turn on him, lips pulling into a snarl as I shrug off my jacket and bring my hands up.

“You wanna dance, motherfucker?” I growl.

“Oh, believe me, I’ve been dying for *ages* to knock your smug fucking teeth down your—”

“What the actual *fuck*?!”

Shit. Both of us whirl at the sound of Neve’s voice this time. She stands with her fists on her hips, glaring at both of us.

“Are we done with the macho dick-measuring contest? Because that would be great.”

Castle scowls, glaring at me.

“You tell me, pretty-boy,” he grunts. “Are we done here? You done playing games trying to figure out where my loyalties are, or what my fucking *intentions* are towards the two young ladies I’ve guarded with my life since they were *children*, you fuckin’ weirdo?”

I blink. And suddenly, I realize how far past the line all of that just went. And it all stemmed from this crazy idea of Castle lusting after Neve.

Which is clearly and obviously *not* a thing.

So why the fuck did it rile me up so much?

Why the hell did I just go all alpha caveman on Castle, who's obviously an ally—and a good one—when it comes to Neve?

I frown, blowing air through my lips.

"Yeah," I mutter, sticking my hand out. "We're done."

Castle eyes me. I shrug. "Sorry. I just…" my eyes dart to Neve, then back to him.

He nods subtly, firmly shaking my hand and then bringing me in for a clap on the back. He lingers for a second, his mouth near my ear, on the far side from where Neve is standing glaring at us so she can't hear.

"We're on the same side, friend. We both just want her safe, yeah?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"Good."

He slaps me on the back once more, then pulls away and smiles at Neve as he claps his hands together.

"All right, where's this famous breakfast? I'm starving."

He walks off, leaving Neve and I alone. She levels a withering gaze at me.

"Really?"

"Really *what*?"

"You're jealous of *Castle*?"

"I'm not jealous," I grunt. My finger darts between us. "Not real, remember? Don't even share a bed."

Neve rolls her eyes. And without another word, she stalks off.

Okay, seriously.

Fuck married life.

AFTER BREAKFAST, and a lengthy talk about beefing up security at the main Kildare residence, the Drakos estate, and my penthouse, and even *more* talks about possible leads into whatever the fuck happened at the wedding, we all go our separate ways. Neve and Eilish head into the library, along with my sister.

Kratos has some people he wants to talk to in Brooklyn in person, so he takes off. Castle disappears with Cillian into his study to make some calls, leaving me alone at the breakfast table nursing a coffee next to Hades.

“So,” my brother grins wolfishly at me. “How was the wedding night?”

“Fuck off.”

He chuckles. “Don’t get me wrong, they’re fun, but maybe lay off the neck bites when there’s going to be a family breakfast the next morning. Pro tip: if Dimitra saw that shit, she’d take a shoe to your ass.”

I roll my eyes. “She’s my goddamn wife, Hades. One, shut up. Two, show a little fucking respect.”

“Just trying to save your sorry ass from Ya-ya.” He shrugs, sipping his coffee before he turns and glances into the library. Neve and Callie are looking at what appear to be wedding pictures on Callie’s phone, judging from the running commentary. Eilish strolls over and leans over the arm of the couch to take a look, causing her skirt to rise up a bit more than maybe she’d like it to if she knew Hades was ogling her.

“Well, *hello*.”

I glare at my brother, grabbing his chin and yanking his face back to me.

“Hey! Hands off, dick.”

“I’ll take my hands off you if you keep *your* eyes off Eilish.”

He arches a brow. “And why is that?”

“Because she’s your fucking family now, you degenerate.”

“Not really.”

“*Hades…*”

He chuckles, shaking his head and patting my knee.

“Relax. She’s not my type, anyway.”

“I was under the impression ‘has a pulse’ was your type.”

Hades clasps his heart, wincing dramatically.

“No, but honestly, I’m not hounding after your wife’s sister. Chill. She’s too damn innocent, anyway. Clean and sweet is a turn off for me, you know that.”

I roll my eyes, standing as I finish the rest of my coffee.

“And you, brother?” Hades grunts. “Is Neve your *type*?”

I don’t answer, just give him a sharp look before I turn and head off to find Cillian in his office.

No, she’s not.

But she’s still mine.

And I crave *more*.

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NEVE

OVER THE PAST WEEK, I've fallen into a routine. Or at least, my nights-into-mornings have—a routine that involves sleeping alone on the couch while my husband sleeps in a bed that *has* to be even bigger than a king. Like, a custom-made job that's got to be fifteen feet wide. Ares could fit another ten people in there easily.

Which is a thought that lingers in my head like poison. Because I'm not actually imagining ten other *people* in Ares' bed with him. I'm thinking of ten other *women* in some freakazoid orgy.

And God, do I hate how stabby and wound up that makes me.

But aside from the nights spent on the couch, I'm basically confined to either his penthouse or, so long as I'm escorted there, the Kildare brownstone.

Classes have been put on hold. Or at least, attending them in person has. Cillian's orders, given the attack at the wedding.

I've protested, mostly because I feel like I *need* to make a stink about it. In the end, though, the idea of heading to campus makes me feel…exposed. And whenever I think about walking to and from different classes, all I can

visualize is that man with the gun leaping from the shadows, trying to kill me again.

So, I'm now officially a remote student. Which isn't actually a thing at NYU—I looked it up—and yet, here I am. Which almost certainly has something to do with my uncle, even if he assures me he was "nothing but cordial" when talking to my professors and the administration.

In the end, so long as it doesn't affect my grades and I'm still allowed to attend remotely, I decide I don't need to know the full truth.

Of course, that doesn't stop my nemesis from making a special point to darken my already sour mood.

I wince when I see the number for Professor Martell—my Urban Policy professor—on my phone.

"Hi, Professor Mar—"

"I don't know how you swung it, and I'm sure I don't want to know."

"Professor Martell, I'm so sorry. There's been a small family issue—"

She barks out a cold laugh.

"Oh, I'm *sure* there has. Now, would this be the issue of your recent marriage to the head of a Greek crime family? Or would it have something to do with your criminal uncle? Perhaps there's a bank that needs heisting?"

Needless to say, there's a reason I call her my nemesis. Urban Policy is already an incredibly hard and nuanced class. But it's even worse with Professor Candace Martell breathing down my neck because she's got some sort of vendetta against me, Lord knows why.

"Anyway, I'm calling because I wanted to make sure you were aware that being remote will mean tougher scrutiny on your coursework."

Because of course it will.

“I’m aware. And thank you again, Professor, for the understanding.”

“I hope you know what you’re getting yourself into, Neve.”

She hangs up.

Yeah, me too.

It’s the sixth or seventh morning of living with Ares when I sit bolt upright on the couch, waking up to pure *bedlam*.

My heart pounds like it’s in full survival mode as violent, horrifying, and fucking *loud* music thunders through the penthouse. No, scratch that. Not even music. It’s *noise*. Like a wall of sonic chaos with someone who sounds like a demon screaming over it.

It’s basically the crap they blasted at the captured terrorists in *Zero Dark Thirty*, and I feel like my heart is about to explode out of my chest. Or like I’m about to have a nervous breakdown, just seven seconds after waking up.

What. The. *Fuck*.

Scowling, I wrap the duvet around myself and storm down the hallway that leads to Ares’ bedroom and his home office. The office door is closed, so I pound on it furiously—over and over, not actually sure if he can even hear me over the madness.

But suddenly, the door yanks open, and I blink as I come face-to-face with a very shirtless Ares.

His biceps are more pumped up than usual, and there's a sheen of sweat on his chest. Glancing past him, I can see the workout bench and dumbbells set up on the far side of the office, next to his desk.

I swallow thickly, heat creeping into my face.

It's been a week since that first night—our wedding night. When he helped peel my dress off and then went on to peel away just about every single one of my inhibitions and reservations.

When he fucked me to within an inch of my life, making me come so hard I'm fairly sure I have permanent abdominal muscle strains from clenching so tightly.

That hasn't been repeated. In fact, we haven't touched each other at all, much less done *that*. And it's not like either of us is rebuking the other's advances.

There hasn't *been* an advance, from either of us.

We haven't even really spoken much. It's as if we had one night of explosive sex, and then both remembered that this was a fake marriage, and decided to throw walls up. Very, very high walls.

Which is fine with me.

Well, *almost* fine.

Because while that one night might have been explosive on a level that's left me shaken, not to mention *still* bruised and sore, it's *not* like it "got it out of our system". Or at least, it didn't get it out of *my* system.

Actually, I'm pretty sure it made it worse.

Sleeping with Ares that one night was like trying heroin. It was like getting a rush from an addictive demon that you gladly allowed to sink its claws

into you. An addiction you literally dream about. Which I do.

Vividly.

Nightly.

In excruciating, mortifying detail.

Because while I might toss and turn all night dreaming of sliding into Ares' bed and feeling him take me like that again, there is no freaking way in *hell* I'm going to be the one who brings it up or initiates anything.

It's not some dumb gender role thing, either.

It's *pride*.

There's no goddamn way I'm giving that smug, arrogant man the satisfaction of having me ask him—worse, *beg* him—to fuck me again.

Nope. Not happening.

As for Ares, either he's playing the same "not asking first" game, or else he doesn't *want* a repeat.

And not to toot my own horn, but I call bullshit on option number two. Which means we're both playing this Cold War game of not giving in first.

And I hate it.

I stop short, still simmering, forcing my eyes to stay on his instead of sliding down his grooved, muscled, sinful body.

"Yes?"

I scowl at him.

"What the *fuck* are you listening to?"

“It’s called death metal, princess.”

“It’s *awful*!”

“Well, thank you for that unsolicited admission of having shit taste in music.”

I glare at him. “Excuse me? I have fantastic taste in—could you *please* turn that down!?”

“What?”

“I *said*!” I scream. “Could you *please* turn this *down*?!”

“Ahh…” he smiles thinly and smugly at me. “No.”

I stare at him. “*Please*?”

Ares lifts a shoulder, cocking a brow.

“I *could*.”

“But?”

“But it’ll cost you.”

My eyes narrow lethally at him. “*Really*?”

“Really and truly.”

I flinch as the singer—or the troll, or goblin, or whoever the *fuck* is screaming German or Elvish or Klingon or whatever into the microphone—starts in again on the deafening track.

“*Fine*!” I snap. “How much? Just say it.”

Ares’ smile turns sadistic and heated.

I hate how my pulse suddenly quickens. How my nipples harden under the thin t-shirt I wore to bed last night.

“Gladly. The price is *you*, on your knees, right here and right now, with my cock down your throat.”

I wish to God I could say my first reaction is to slap him. Or to call him a pig, or an asshole. Or to tell him to go fuck himself with a red-hot poker.

Instead, though, because apparently sleeping with Ares Drakos all of *once* has turned me into a dick-junkie with the hair-trigger libido of a twelve-year-old boy, that’s not what my first reaction is. At all.

The first thing I do when he names his price is clench my thighs together as heat pools between them. The second thing I do is forcibly stop myself from literally dropping to my knees right here.

I think I need psychiatric help.

I swallow, collecting myself and forcing my breath and pulse to steady as best they can. Then I smile tightly at him, trying to hold back the rush of lust that floods my face.

Ares smiles back.

“Is that a yes I see in your eyes, dear wife?”

“Hrm? No. That was actually a ‘go suck it yourself, asshole’ that you saw. Rookie mistake, don’t beat yourself up.”

His lips curl into a snarl at the corners, and I shiver.

“We’re having dinner at my family’s home tonight. My people, yours, a few business associates.”

“Why?”

Ares shrugs.

“Because we need to portray a strong, united front to our enemies and our allies. It’s all part of the show. You’ll be ready to leave at six.”

“Pass.”

He frowns.

“Excuse me?”

“I said pass. As in, no thank you.”

“It wasn’t a request, wife. Neither is the stipulation that you wear what I have laid out on the bed for you.”

My brows knit as I turn to glance down the hall at the open door to the bedroom. I glance back at him.

“You’re not curious?”

I grit my teeth. Fuck, of course I am. Ares grins, brushes past me, and strides into the bedroom. I follow, if only to get further away from that fucking death metal. Inside the bedroom, he turns, raising a muscled arm to lift a thin, short, glittery and glamorous little black dress.

It’s so not me it’s comical.

“Yeah, no. I’m not wearing that.”

“You very much are.”

“I’m sorry, were you under the impression that I was a professional *escort*?” I snap. “Because that’s who wears a dress like that.”

“Then the escorts you’re familiar with have very good taste. You’re wearing this tonight.”

I draw in a slow breath, measuring my words before I raise my eyes, smiling tautly at him.

“Do you remember me mentioning that you might be used to a certain type of girl?”

Ares rolls his eyes.

“The type who would wear that?” I press. “And how I’m *not* that girl?”

Ares is silent for a second, just staring at me. Suddenly, he makes an exaggerated yawning motion.

“*Asshole*.”

He clears his throat. “Sorry. I sort of nodded off there for a second.”

“You are *such* a dick.”

“And *you’ll* be ready at six, wearing this. We’ll drive over together. End. Of. Discussion.”

Before I can open my mouth, he’s already striding across the bedroom into the bathroom. His workout shorts and briefs suddenly drop to the floor as he steps out of them, turning my face a scandalous shade of red as my eyes become glued to his perfect ass.

Then he clears his throat, snapping my eyes up to his, looking at me with amusement over his shoulder.

My face throbs with heat.

“If you’d like a closer look, you’re more than welcome to join me in the shower.”

I swallow, shuddering slightly as raw desire instantly floods my system.

“I mean…” he smirks. “If you *really* need it.”

His cocky grin makes sure I very much understand “it” doesn’t mean “a shower.” No, he’s looking for me to break first. To beg him if I can take a shower with him, if just to be near his cock.

“You’re more than welcome to,” he says again, winking at me. “So long as you say *please*.”

Mother. Fucker.

I throw his smug smile right back at him, flipping him off before I storm out of the bedroom as the shower starts behind me. I march right into his office and shut the music off, physically exhaling in relief as the blessed silence suddenly drapes over me.

Thank *God*. I was about to lose my damn sanity if I had to listen to another minute of that.

Back in the living room, I curl up on the couch with a cup of coffee and pull my laptop and books out of my bag. Fake mafia-married or not, I still have schoolwork to get through if I’m ever going to get this freaking master’s degree.

I’m grumpy, still half asleep, and wildly undersexed. But at least it’s quiet —

I almost jump out of my skin as the rage-screaming metal music suddenly blasts through the penthouse from Ares’ office. Coffee spills onto my lap and all over my study notes, and I curse loudly as I spring to my feet.

“Sorry, did you say something?”

I whip my gaze up, glaring furiously at Ares as he leans casually against the wall by the hallway. He’s dressed this time, at least.

“You *asshole*—”

He frowns, tapping his ears and shaking his head.

“I’m sorry, could you speak up? I can’t hear you over the music.”

I glare daggers at him.

“I have to go attend to some things. The dress is still on the bed. You will be ready at six.”

My teeth grind as I watch him casually stroll across the penthouse, open the door, and leave without another word. The second the front door is closed, I march back to his office to turn the freaking music off.

Only to find the door shut and locked.

Son of a bitch.

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NEVE

I SMILE CORDIALLY at the member of the Drakos household staff who greets me when I step off the elevator into the lavish home.

“Good evening, Mrs. Drakos—”

“Ms. Kildare.”

The man frowns in puzzlement.

“I’m keeping my maiden name,” I explain.

He nods stiffly. “Very good, ma’am. Drinks are being served in the second-floor library.”

“That sounds *great*.”

Was that too enthusiastic? I’m already buzzed from the two glasses of wine I drank a little quickly at the cocktail lounge down the street.

“May I trouble you for the time?”

The man smiles and glances at his watch.

“Quarter after seven, miss.”

“*Lovely*. Thank you.”

“Shall I escort you to the—”

“Oh, no, thank you. I can manage.”

A spring in my step and a pleasant wine buzz lifting my spirits, I skip down the hall to one of the elegant marble staircases that lead to the second floor. I pause at one of the gold-gilded mirrors hanging on the wall, spinning and grinning at myself.

The strappy, open-backed, floor-length dress is *far* more my style than whatever that Pretty Woman bullshit was that Ares wanted me to prance around in. This one is white with a blue design, reminding me of a classic blue china pattern, and I love it.

This is what happens when Ares decides to throw his weight around and try to make me his docile, obedient little wife. *Not* “ready and waiting for him” at six. *Not* wearing the little dress-up outfit he picked out for me.

My terms.

I enjoy one more delighted twirl before I make my way up to the library for cocktails. But I’m barely stepping off the staircase before a hand suddenly grabs my wrist and spins me to pin me against a wall. I gasp, my heart skipping and thudding as my eyes lock with my husband’s stormy, piercing ones.

“This is an interesting game you’ve chosen to play.”

I shiver. Even though I’ve got liquid courage flowing in my veins, and even though I’ve given myself a pep talk over the past hour sitting at the bar, telling myself I’m not going to put up with his crap…standing here, pinned to the wall, with the most dangerously attractive and *lethal* man I’ve ever known looming over me, I still falter a little.

Then I catch myself, drawing a breath and shrugging casually.

“*I’m* not playing any games.”

“Bullshit. I waited for you for—”

“I’m simply choosing not to play *your* game.”

Ares’ eyes narrow.

“I told you quite clearly—”

“It still hasn’t dawned on you that you don’t own me, has it?”

His eyes flare and his grip tightens on my arm, making me shiver as heat and lust simmer traitorously and dangerously through me.

“Like hell I don’t. You’re my *wife*.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m your *roommate,* Ares. We don’t even share a bed.”

“It’s a little hard to feel sympathy for a woman who’s actively decided to spend her nights on the couch, Neve.”

“Wow, Ares, I know a woman *not* falling over herself to crawl on hands and knees to your bed is a foreign concept to you. Well, I’m glad to be opening your eyes to fresh experiences. You’re welcome.”

He smiles smugly.

“Ahh, there’s that jealousy again.”

“I—”

I pause when I see a flash of movement past his shoulder. Down the hall, a woman steps out of the library, cocktail in one hand and a cell phone up to her ear in the other. She smiles broadly at something, nodding before she turns to glance our way.

I wasn't "jealous" a second ago. But when I realize who the woman is, my temper—and the jealousy I keep swearing to myself doesn't exist—surges.

Lucia *fucking* Bolinaro.

Here.

Again.

She flashes a quick, fake smile at me before she ducks back into the library. My pulse thuds as I turn back to Ares and smile. "Oh *please*. You *wish* I was jealous of your whores."

He snorts.

"My *whores*?"

"Your *special friends*," I sneer. "Women. Girlfriends. Fuck-buddies. *Paramours*. Whatever you call them all."

His brow furrows, a slight curl lingering at the corners of his mouth.

"I'm thirty-one, Neve," he growls. "I hope you weren't under the impression that I'd been saving myself for marriage."

"Oh, believe me, I never *once* imagined you would have that sort of self-control," I snap. "But I'm not sure, given how important our whole *image* thing is to you, that inviting them to dine with your new wife is exactly appropriate."

He frowns in confusion before its click for him.

"You're talking about Lucia?"

"I'm not talking about—"

"She's a friend."

“Great.”

“As in a *friend*, Neve,” he mutters. “That’s not a euphemism. Her father is Ricardo Bolinaro. We’re connected through *business*. Not that I should have to fucking explain myself to you.”

“You don’t. Because I don’t give a shit.”

He rolls his eyes before narrowing them at me.

“And you?” he growls quietly. “Any skeletons of ex-boyfriends I should know about?”

“Oh, *loads*.”

It’s like pushing a button. Instantly, I watch his face stiffen into a mask of fury, his eyes livid and dangerous.

I shiver, swallowing back the flush of excitement at how outrageously hot it is that he looks like that at the mention of my exes.

Of which, by the way, there’s a grand, pathetic total of *one*.

“I’m twenty-four, *Ares*,” I spit back at him, mimicking his tone from a second ago. “I hope you weren’t under the impression that *I’d* been saving myself.”

His jaw tightens, and so does his possessive grip on my arm, to an almost painful level.

But *fuck*, is it hot to see him morph into this mask of fury and jealousy just at the teasing mention of someone else.

“Aww, is your poor widdle ego bruised that I wasn’t a blushing bride on our wedding nigh—”

I gasp as he suddenly yanks me almost off my feet, dragging me around the corner and shoving me ahead of him through a doorway into a guest bathroom. My pulse skyrockets, my core quivering and clenching as Ares storms in after me and locks the door.

“Just what the fuck do you think you’re—”

My words turn into a whimper as he forcibly spins me around, pinning me to the full-length mirror mounted on the tiled wall just inside the bathroom. His weight presses to me, crushing me and making me gasp eagerly as I feel his lips by my ear.

“I saw *plenty* of blushing on you,” he growls.

I blurt a stifled, shuddered moan when his teeth rake my earlobe.

“*Especially when I was fucking you*.”

My brow caves, my cheek pressed to the mirror and my breath fogging it as he yanks my dress up to my waist. He spanks my ass with his palm, making me yelp as I claw at the glass in front of me.

“And let’s get something straight,” Ares hisses dangerously into my ear.

I gasp and my eyes stare as he yanks my panties down to my knees and shoves his thigh between my legs, forcing them apart. I hear his zipper, and I tremble as I pant against the mirror, shuddering when one of his big hands wraps around my throat from behind.

“We are not *roommates*. You’re my fucking *wife*.”

His fat, swollen cock head sinks between my pussy lips, pausing there as I teeter on the edge of my sanity.

“And I’m fucking *tired* of pretending otherwise.”

He grips my hip, squeezes my throat, and drives *every fucking inch* of his huge cock deep into me in one powerful thrust.

Holy. FUCK.

For a split second I wince, but the pleasure that follows the initial invading sensation is overwhelming. He growls, roughly plunging into me again—this time so forcefully that it raises me up onto the balls of my feet. I cry out, moaning against the mirror as waves of desire cloud my vision. Ares growls into my ear, gripping me tightly and fucking me brutally. Mercilessly. Aggressively.

Deliciously.

And as his gorgeous cock piledrives into me over and over, his abs slapping my ass and his fingers wrapped tight around my throat, I lose myself in the savageness of it.

I've been craving this, like a drug. Like a junkie aching for the next hit. *All freaking week*.

"Tell me," he rasps into my ear, grunting as he fucks me, his balls slapping my clit as I whine in pleasure. "Tell me how many times you've touched yourself on that couch over the last week, thinking of me pinning you down and fucking you like I know *damn well* you've wanted me to."

I whimper again, panting as he rams into me, fucking me against the mirror over and over.

"I—I didn't—"

"*Liar*. How many times, Neve?" He growls as he buries himself, his hand leaving my hip to spank my ass, hard. "Tell me how many fucking times you made this pretty little pussy come, wishing it was—

“*Ten*!” I blurt, sobbing on the pleasure as he grinds his cock deep into me.

Ares groans.

“You touched yourself *ten fucking time* in seven days?”

I whimper.

“*Such a dirty girl*.”

His teeth bite at my neck, making me gasp as the pleasure mounts.

“*Show me*.”

I don’t even bother fighting it. I don’t try and act scandalized, or shocked. I can’t. I just instantly drop one of my hands eagerly and greedily between my legs, moaning as I start to rub my slippery clit as he fucks me.

“*There’s my good girl*,” he rasps into my ear. “Let me feel you fucking come for me. Let me feel this hot little pussy come all over my fucking cock, like I know it’s been aching to all fucking week.”

I cry out, moaning loader and louder as he hammers into me. I know our families are right down the hall and might be able to hear. I know I’m being too loud.

But *I. Can’t. Stop*.

I feel a pinch and a yank at my knees, and then the sound of fabric ripping. Before suddenly, lace is pressed into my mouth, and my world *ignites*.

It’s my panties.

He just ripped my fucking panties off and shoved them into my *mouth* to muffle my moans and cries as he fucks me against the bathroom wall.

I lose all self-control. All composure. All sense of anything except the electric feel of his body pinning me to the mirror as his thick cock pistons into me again and again, like a jackhammer, until my legs start to give out.

His hand tightens around my throat as his mouth teases over my earlobe.

"*Look at yourself,*" he commands.

I whimper as my eyes lift to the mirror. My pulse surges and my core clenches tight as I take in the utterly submissive sight: Ares roughly fucking me from behind, my face turning red from the pleasure and his fingers around my throat, my panties stuffed into my mouth as drool drips down my chin, all while I'm rubbing my clit furiously, desperate for release.

"And now you'll watch yourself fucking come for me. Do it. Watch yourself come all over my cock like a greedy girl."

I explode. I mean my entire freaking world *detonates*. I scream into the gag in my mouth and claw at the mirror so hard I'm sure it's going to shatter. I arch against it, my toes flexing as I rise up onto the balls of my feet with his cock buried to the hilt inside of me.

The release feels like crossing over into the afterlife for a second. It's like being blown apart into a million fluttering, scattering pieces swept up in the vortex of a hurricane.

I blast off into another world, choking and sobbing in pleasure against the mirror as Ares sinks into me. I moan as I feel his cock throb and pulse, spilling his cum deep inside of me as I sink back into him.

Time goes still. The world stops turning.

Holy. SHIT.

I’m still shaking as I feel his lips brush my neck and my ear. The ruined panties are pulled from my lips, and I choke out a whimpered moan. Then suddenly, he’s twisting my head around, and his lips are crushing mine, kissing me deeply.

Slowly, I turn in his arms. My hands cup his face as his slide possessively over my hips, pulling me to him. The kiss deepens, surging as we gasp into each other’s mouths.

And then, it’s over.

Slowly, he pulls back, his eyes sparking with liquid fire as they meet mine. I blush as he tucks his cock back into his slacks and smooths down my dress.

“I’m not sure you’ll be putting these back on.”

I look down to see him twirling my ripped, wet panties on a finger. My face burns hotly and my lips purse as I yank them from his hands and stuff them into my bag after I pick it up off the floor.

Swallowing, I look up into his eyes, and we both just sort of—freeze.

Ares clears his throat as he fixes his jacket and sweeps his hair back from his face with his fingers.

“Now,” he growls, eyeing me with a small smirk on his face that electrifies me all over again. “Let’s go eat.”

I don’t know what that just was. But it was something else altogether.

Something unexpected. Something soaring and high. Maybe to a height we weren’t supposed to reach, like Icarus flying too close to the sun.

Because it sure as fuck feels like I’m on fire.

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NEVE

I WALK NEXT to Ares in a daze as we head down the hall to the library where everyone is having pre-dinner drinks. My pulse is still thudding in my ears. My legs feel like spaghetti, and my ankles wobble in my heels.

I wince as I start to topple, my ankle almost twisting. Suddenly, his hand is there, entwining with mine, his other hand on my lower back to steady me.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I shrug casually. “You?”

Ares glances at me, arching a brow. It’s like the Cold War we had all week, with neither of us wanting to be the first to suggest another round of Olympian, god-like sex to the other.

I smirk to myself.

Guess I won that one, seeing as he’s the one who just dragged me into the bathroom to fuck my brains out.

But now that the pressure valve has been released, and we’ve blown off that steam and sexual energy, it’s like we’re back to square one of yet another stalemate. Except this time, neither of us wants to be the one to say state the obvious: that whatever just happened back there was *crazy* good.

Absurdly good. Ruined-for-normal-sex-now good.

Ares shrugs. “I’m fine.”

“Cool.”

Cool? Ugh.

Just then, mercifully right before we get to the door to the huge Drakos family library and cocktails, we pass a big, gilded mirror hanging on the wall. I turn, and my face drops as I catch my reflection—which I apparently neglected to really and truly take in back in the bathroom while I was still in the throes of my post-orgasmic high.

I’m a mess. No, scratch that. I am a *hot mess*. In fact, I look like the poster child for “just got fucked silly in a bathroom”. Which, of course, is what I am.

Big yikes.

I stop short, pulling my hand from Ares’.

“Were you planning to let me walk into dinner with both of our families looking like this?!”

He grins, shrugging.

“Dick.”

“Again? So soon? Well, if you insist, but Ya-ya is really going to be pissed if we’re late for—”

“Oh my God, grow up,” I mutter, biting back a grin and forcing a scowl as I glare at him.

I pause in front of the mirror to fix my hair and pull a lipstick out of my bag.

“You go in first. I’ll be right there.”

“Sure.”

He leans in and kisses my cheek.

Both of us freeze.

I blink quickly. His brow furrows, his jaw clicking before he clears his throat.

“Yeah, see you in there.”

It’s not until he’s back in the library, door closed between us, that I exhale.

Like, seriously, what the hell is happening?

Quickly, I finish making myself *not* look like a club skank. When I turn to the door to the library, I pause.

I’m not ready for all that family chitchat yet.

So instead, I turn and click my heels down a different gorgeously decorated hallway of the extensive Drakos estate. I poke my head into a sitting room. And there, across the room near the window, I spy a fully-stocked bar cart.

Lovely.

I march over and pour myself a small glass of whiskey, neat. It’s not like I’m an alcoholic and I “need” a drink. But, I mean…right now…

I kinda need a drink.

The whiskey burns nicely as it goes over my tongue and down my throat. I shiver, exhaling slowly as I turn….and just about have a heart attack when I realize I’m not alone in the room.

Dimitra Drakos is sitting in a chair right next to the door I just walked through. She's such a tiny, bird-like thing that I never even saw her.

"Oh! Hi!" I blurt.

The Drakos matriarch smiles at me, toasting me with the glass of wine in her hand.

I grin. "Looks like we both wanted a quieter drink than a whole cocktail party."

She just smiles back, nodding. And suddenly, it occurs to me that the reason we haven't really ever had a conversation, not even at the wedding, is that she *doesn't speak English*.

I smile curiously at her.

"So, how's your night going?"

The older woman grins and nods.

"*Óchi tóso kaló óso esý. Allá aftó symvaínei giatí den me gámisan móno sto bánio ton episkeptón!*"

Uh…

She chuckles, grinning at me and taking a sip of wine.

Right, so, that's a no on the English.

"You…don't speak English, do you?" I venture.

Dimitra smiles broadly, her face lighting up.

"English! Yes! New York! Okay!"

Then she nods to the chair against the wall next to her and pats it invitingly with her free hand. I grin, nodding as I walk over and sit down next to my

grandmother-in-law.

“So, I’m your new granddaughter-in-law.” I arch my brows at her, smiling wryly. “Lucky you,” I add sarcastically. “Bet you didn’t have any idea what a headache I’d be for your grandson.”

She smiles, still nodding.

“You’re probably smiling because you think I’m going to fall in love with him and give you all lots of babies. But that’s just not going to happen. Sorry.”

Neither part.

Dimitra just keeps on smiling.

“I just had the most mind-blowing sex of my life in your guest bathroom with your grandson,” I blurt. “I mean, like *wow* type sex. Know what I mean?”

She smiles, nodding again.

I chuckle, grinning as I clink my glass to hers.

“Well, cheers, Dimitra.”

Suddenly, a large man pokes his head into the room: Kratos, the resident Drakos giant. His brows knit when he sees Dimitra and I sitting together, but then he smiles.

“Ready for dinner, Ya-ya? *Étoimoi gia deípno*?”

Dimitra sighs, standing and draining the last of her wine in one go.

I think she and I might just get along swimmingly. Even if her grandson is a grumpypants with an ego about as big as his…*yeah*.

She pats Kratos on the arm and walks out by herself. My brother-in-law turns to smile at me.

“Have a nice talk with Ya-ya?”

“Oh, *fantastic*.”

He grins as we both file into the library, where a huge table has been beautifully set, with everyone else already sitting around it. Eilish gives me a “where the heck have you been” look, and I fight back the blush that rises to my face as I take the only empty seat at the table—right next to Ares, of course.

Waiters bring out plates of food and pour wine. Suddenly, there’s the sound of a spoon clinking against a wine glass. When I look up, I raise a brow when I see Dimitra standing at the head of the table.

“Everyone quiet,” Hades grunts. “Ya-ya wants to give a speech.”

Callie, who’s sitting on the other side of me, giggles as she leans close.

“Oh man, Ya-ya *loves* her grand speeches.”

“You’ll have to translate,” I murmur at her before I turn as Dimitra clears her throat.

“I want to thank everyone from both families for being here tonight.”

It’s in perfect English.

Fuck. Me. Sideways.

“And I want to say, cheers to family, to the future, and…” She turns, leveling her eyes at me as I shrink, praying to all that is holy that I’ll melt into a puddle and seep through the cracks in the floor.

“To falling in love.”

She winks at me.

“And lots of babies, of course.”

She’s fucking with me.

“We’re so happy to welcome such a good girl like Neve into our home and our family, as wife to our dear Ares.”

Yep. She’s totally fucking with me.

Ares leans in, his mouth by my ear.

“Do you think she’d still think you were such a good girl if she knew you’d just been fucked against the bathroom wall with your own panties stuffed in your mouth?”

His lips tease my earlobe.

“*Tell me*,” he growls. “*Can you still feel my cum deep inside you? Or is it already dripping down your—*”

I keep smiling at the rest of the table as I shove my fist down towards his balls. But he stops me cold, his grip twisting my hand away as he shakes his head.

“I’m beginning to like it a little too much when you play dirty, *dear*.”

We all start to eat, when suddenly a chiming sound from a cell phone dings through the murmur of conversation.

Ares frowns, glaring at Hades as his younger brother winces and pulls a phone sheepishly out of his jacket pocket.

“No phones at the table, dummy,” Callie teases. “Ya-ya’s rules.”

“Yeah, I know, I know,” Hades mutters, shooting his grandmother a sheepish look. “Sorry, Ya-ya, I forgot it wasn’t on silen—”

His eyes land on his phone. And slowly, his whole face goes still.

“Hades,” Ares mutters. “Put the damn phone—”

“We need to turn on the news.”

The whole table looks confused as Hades lurches to his feet, glancing at Cillian.

Ares frowns. “*Hades.* We’re in the middle of—”

“*Now*, Ares,” Hades hisses, a cold look on his face.

He bolts across the room, pushing a button on a remote that slides one of the bookcases aside, revealing a flatscreen display behind it. The rest of us glance at each other nervously as we all get up and head over while Hades switches on the news.

A big news-network logo fills the screen and dramatic theme music plays underneath before a familiar anchor clears her throat and nods to the camera.

“Welcome back to the show. If you’re just tuning in, we’re about to go live to ADX Florence super-max prison in Freemont County, Colorado…”

Something inside of me tenses and goes ice cold.

“Where we’re about to bring you face-to-face, for the very first time since his incarceration, with the most dangerous man in America.”

Oh God.

No.

I feel a presence behind me. Stiffening, I swivel my eyes to the side and steal a glance over my shoulder to see a stern-faced Cillian glaring pure hate at the screen.

“Might be best if you didn’t watch…” he murmurs to me.

The screen cuts to another reporter. This one is sitting in a stark metal room, in a steel chair bolted to the cement floor. He looks nervous as hell, like Clarice Starling the first time she meets Hannibal Lecter.

The reporter clears his throat.

“Good evening. We’ve received special permission from the United States Justice Department to bring you this exclusive in-person interview with the most dangerous man in America…”

My eyes squeeze shut. I feel like I’m about to fall over. Suddenly, Eilish is right there next to me, her hand gripping mine and squeezing it tight comfortingly.

“Seamus O’Conor.”

The door behind the reporter swings open. My vision tunnels, blocking everything out around me until all I see is the two guards leading, in handcuffs, the bear of a man with the silver beard, long, silver hair, and look of pure evil glinting in his eyes as they suddenly snap up to stare down the barrel of the camera lens.

And right into my soul.

For the first time in fifteen years, even if it’s through a TV, I’m face-to-face with the monster.

My monster.

Hades whistles, shaking his head as the built older man onscreen has his manacles adjusted so he is cuffed to his chair, which is similarly bolted to the floor at a safe distance from the reporter's.

"*The Devil*."

Dimitra's voice is cold and vicious, her eyes narrowed at the screen.

"Welcome, Mr. O'Conor," the reporter launches into his interview on the TV. "Now, you were a contract killer for the Irish mob, is that right?"

My monster smiles widely, flashing white teeth set into a jaw that might even be handsome if it wasn't pure evil.

"No. I was an *artist*."

The reporter glances nervously at the camera and clears his throat again.

"Right. Of course. Well… One of the reasons we wanted to talk to you today is that even though there's been public calls for you never to be released, it would appear you're up for parole next month."

It feels like my lungs have been ripped out. I choke, suddenly unable to breathe, and I falter, only being saved from actually falling to the floor by Eilish and Cillian.

What. The. FUCK.

I turn my head, my face pale and horrified as I meet my uncle's eyes.

"*Did you know?*"

"No." He shakes his head grimly, his eyes cold. "No, I did *not*." He yanks his phone out before giving me a hard and yet comforting look. "I'm going to make some calls. Are you okay?"

I nod, swallowing. “I will be.” When I turn back to the TV, still squeezing my sister’s hand tightly, I catch Ares looking at me curiously. He frowns, but I pull my gaze away from him, back to the monster on screen.

“Now, Mr. O’Conor, if you *are* released, what will you do? Start fresh? Live a new life? I’m sure the fifteen years you’ve been incarcerated have given you plenty of time to think about—”

The monster starts to laugh. Quietly at first, then louder and louder, until he’s roaring a belly-shaking laugh and tossing his silver-maned head back. Even the hardened prison guards behind him look terrified.

They should be.

Slowly, the monster stops laughing. He chuckles, wiping a tear from his eye before his gaze snaps directly again to the camera.

“If I were to be released,” he growls in his thick Irish brogue. “The very first thing I would do is go after the cockroaches who put me in here.”

The interviewer frowns.

“Uh, Mr. O’Conor, I think what I meant was—”

“I’d cut the throat of *every. Single. Fucking*—”

“Mr. O’Conor, please—”

“—*Kildare* out there.”

The library goes silent. And I can feel the eyes of the entire Drakos family slowly swiveling to stare at Eilish and me. Castle moves closer to me, his face grim.

On the TV, Seamus’ lips curl into a demonic smile right into the camera.

“And I’d start with *you*,” he growls, smiling *right at me*, as if he can fucking see me through the news station camera lens.

“Yes, you,” he rasps. “I can’t wait to see how you’ve grown up, *Neve*.”

I choke, my heart climbing into my throat.

“*What the fuck is this*,” Ares snarls, whipping his gaze to me, a look I can’t quite read in his eyes as they stab into me. I look back at him, mute, helpless.

“Yes… If these idiots are generous enough to let me out,” Seamus chuckles quietly, “I’m coming for *you*, Neve.” His smile grows wider, and toothier, and his jaw clenches tightly.

And then it happens. So fast that everyone in the cell and watching the TV actually jumps.

Seamus roars, flexing his full strength against the cuffs. They hold, but the chair they’re attached to doesn’t. The metal whines and snaps as the arms of the chair break off, still attached to his wrists. And suddenly, the live feed is pure carnage.

He whirls, using one of the pieces of the metal chair arm handcuffed to his wrist as a weapon, smashing it into the reporter’s horrified face. He whirls again, swinging it into one of the guard’s necks, sending blood splattering across the wall before he smashes his fist into the second guard’s face.

Sirens go off. Lights flash red in the background as Seamus turns, hulking and grinning demonically. He grabs the camera off its tripod, lifting it wildly to his leering, grinning face until his image fills the screen.

“*I’m coming for you, Neve*,” he chuckles, eyes slicing right into my heart. “And I’m going to make you *fucking bleed*.”

The shot widens and jerks crazily as he moves the camera away from his face. Then the door behind him smashes in, and a legion of riot cops comes crushing inside, wrestling Seamus to the ground before suddenly the camera cuts out.

The library goes silent.

My vision blurs.

And then I faint.

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ARES

AFTER THAT, dinner is fucking *over*. Hades takes charge of ushering everyone who isn't immediate Drakos or Kildare family out. I stay with Neve where I've laid her on a couch in the parlor after she went catatonic.

When that fucking psycho shit-stain threatened on live television to kill her.

Something ties into in a knot of hatred and violence inside of me. And yet, for all the fury in me looking for a vengeful release, there's more, a part of me that isn't wreathed in snarling anger and vicious fury.

A part of me that can't drag my eyes away from Neve as she rests sleeping on the couch.

Oh, that fury is still there. I know who Seamus O'Conor is. You'd be hard pressed to find someone in our world who hadn't at least *heard* of him. I mean, Christ, we used to trade stories about "The Executioner" when we were kids, treating him like a real life bogeyman, trying to spook each other into not being able to sleep.

But what the fuck is he doing roaring at Neve through a fucking TV interview that he's going to make her *bleed*? That's a question that's beyond me. But I'm going to get answers, and I'm going to get them *now*.

The door opens and closes. I glance up to see Calliope walking over to me. Her brow furrows as she approaches the couch where Eilish and I have been keeping close to Neve.

“How is she?”

“Still out, but she’ll be okay. How’s Ya-ya?”

My sister nods. “She’s all right. Spooked. But she’s up in her room on the balcony with a glass of ouzo. She said she wanted to be alone.”

I glance over to the other couch and to my brothers, who nod at what our sister’s just relayed.

Neve’s eyelids flicker, her brow furrows, and slowly, I watch her emerge into consciousness.

“Hey, you.” Eilish, who hasn’t left Neve’s side either, grins widely as she peers into her sister’s face. “How do you feel?”

Neve groans as she gingerly sits up and blinks more fully awake.

“I don’t know,” she mumbles. Her eyes slip to the side, and she tenses when she sees me sitting on the end of the couch, my gaze trained on her. Her brow furrows. “What?” she mumbles dismissively.

Before I can say a thing, the door to the parlor opens, and Cillian walks in, followed by Castle.

My jaw grinds as I stand.

“What the *fuck* was that?”

The Irishman’s supernaturally green eyes land first on me, then slide over to Hades, Kratos, Callie, and Eilish.

“*That* was Seamus O’Conor.”

“*No shit*,” Hades snaps. “But what the fuck was he doing calling out Neve —”

“Yes,” I interrupt, turning to Cillian. “I too would very much like to know what the hell The Executioner was just doing on TV threatening to kill *my wife*.”

Cillian’s gaze lances past me to his niece. I frown, turning to see Neve nod quietly at him, and then him nod quietly back.

“*Well*?” I growl.

Cillian is silent for a minute before he strolls over to the window and opens it a crack. He leans against the wall, pulls a cigarette from a silver case in his breast pocket, and slips it between his lips.

Callie frowns. “You can’t smoke in—”

Cillian lights his cigarette with the flick of his gleaming silver Zippo. My sister glares at him, then stares at me open-mouthed. I just shake my head.

Pick your battles. And right now, answers are my first priority.

Beside me, Hades snorts.

“Whatever. That old fuck is a ghost story anyway. And he’s in the most fucking hardcore prison in the country So fuck him. Let him even *try* to come at us with whatever balls he thinks he’s—”

“Seamus O’Conor is not to be trifled with,” Cillian growls quietly, silencing my brother.

My gaze swivels to where he’s standing by the window. He drags quietly on his cigarette, the cherry illuminating his face and his piercing eyes.

“The Irish Devil. The Executioner. He came up as a platoon captain in the IRA during the Troubles. Back in Ireland, he racked up thirty-seven confirmed kills, plus I would wager at least double that unconfirmed. That was before he was dishonorably discharged for—and I quote—*cruel and barbaric conduct in the field*.”

It’s quiet as the older Irishman slowly lets his lethal green gaze rake across every face in the room.

“Do you have any idea of the kind of horrible shit you have to pull for the IR fucking *A* to think you’re too extreme?”

Hades starts to open his mouth, but I shoot him a cold glare to shut him up.

“After that, he made is way Stateside, where his…*specialized services* were in demand. He became the top hired killer in Boston, New York, and Chicago, and over the next twenty or so years, his kill count was in the hundreds.”

Hades whistles quietly.

“Oh, I’m just getting fucking started,” Cillian growls quietly. “As you know, Declan—Neve and Eilish’s father—was my half-brother, through *my* father Brendan and his…improprieties.”

Hades snorts. “So, your dad fucked around a lot. How is this relevant?”

Cillian smiles thinly. “Perhaps we should break out a the ouija board and ask your *mother* how it’s relevant.”

Fuck.

I can see from the glint in Cillian’s eye that throwing that out there was less about insulting me and my siblings than it was about getting a *rise* out of us—because Cillian’s a prick like that.

I keep my calm. Calliope glares at him, but she keeps cool too.

Hades and Kratos, however, fall right into the trap. The two of them swear violently as they lurch to their feet to rush Cillian.

"*Enough*," I bark tersely. My two brothers glare at me, but they do as I say and stop. I swivel my gaze to Cillian. "Think we could stop baiting each other for five seconds so you could tell us what the fuck is going on?"

A hint of a malicious grin teases Cillian's lips. But he nods.

"Of course," he continues. "Declan's mother, my father's mistress, was Sheila…" he takes a slow drag of his cigarette and then exhales as his brow deepens. "*O'Conor*."

Realization hits me.

"You're joking."

Cillian shakes his head. "No, I'm not. Sheila O'Conor, as in that psychopath Seamus O'Conor's *sister*. I'm going to assume you're not a complete fucking idiot and did the research into our family and Declan's legitimacy as a Kildare before any of us even *arrived* at this truce?"

I did.

Brendan Kildare, Cillian's father, had a son—Declan—outside of his marriage, before Cillian was born. When Cillian popped out, *he* obviously became the next in line to inherit the Kildare throne. But the Irish Council of Clans—which is sort of the ruling body for the Irish mafia—agreed to legitimize Declan, the half-brother, as a *Kildare* and not an O'Conor, despite the fact that Sheila and Brendan weren't ever married. Strange, but in their eyes it kept a "Kildare" presence at the helm in New York while Brendan—and later Cillian—saw to the empire in the UK and Europe.

“You mean how your half-brother was legitimized by the Council as a Kildare, in order to run things here in New York.”

Cillian nods. “Exactly. Declan, Neve and Eilish’s father…” his brow furrows. “Who also happens to be the *nephew* of Seamus O’Conor.”

Fuck.

Somehow, I missed this in my research into the Kildare family, before the arrangement to marry Neve moved forward. Obviously, I saw that Sheila’s last name was O’Conor. But, I mean fuck, there’s like a million fucking O’Conors, and Mc-Thises and Mc-Thats with the Irish. And it wasn’t exactly advertised that Sheila’s brother was the goddamn devil himself.

Sheila’s brother…and Neve’s fucking *great uncle*.

Slowly, I slide my eyes to where she’s still sitting stone silent and still on the couch. Her face has a paleness to it that’s not just because she just fainted. And her eyes have this cold, barely contained fear in them.

I don’t blame her. That fucking psychopath who just told national television that he wants to kill her is her fucking *blood*.

“That family connection,” Cillian growls, “is the only reason Seamus’… *methods* were tolerated as long as they were.”

My sister swallows uneasily. “What *methods* were those?”

“Callie…” I growl quietly.

She turns to me, her brow furrowing. “What? I want to know.”

Cillian shrugs. “Besides Seamus being an unhinged, deranged *psycho*—”

“Well, I bet you two have plenty in common, then,” Hades mutters, smirking at his own humor.

Cillian looks at my brother with a long, thin, cold stare that chills *my* blood, and I'm not even on the receiving end of it. Slowly, his eyes slide to Neve. I frown, watching a secret look exchange between the two of them. Cillian pauses. When Neve nods quietly, he clears his throat.

But my eyes linger on my wife. And all the things she's not saying out loud right now.

"Seamus is also a religious fanatic," Cillian continues. "It's one of the reasons the IRA washed their hands of him, and the Council of Clans finally put their fucking foot down on his methods here in the US. Seamus wouldn't just go after a target. He went after their fucking families. Their wives, their children—"

Eilish's hand slides across the couch to hold her sister's tightly.

"He saw his method of 'bleeding the innocent'—and I do mean that *quite* literally—as making reparations to God for the wicked deeds of the people he was contracted to kill."

Callie shivers, her face going pale. Kratos' jaw clenches as he shakes his head, grunting something in disgust I can't quite make out.

But quickly, I've stopped looking at Callie. And Kratos. And Cillian.

I'm looking at *Neve*, and very much wondering why she looks so fucking pale right now.

Empty. Cold. Like a ghost is dragging its nails up her spine.

"Unfortunately, by the time the Council acted, it was a case of too little too late. They'd let the devil loose and couldn't send him back to Hell with a mere snap of their fingers. Seamus went rogue, started trying to build his own empire. And *that's* when the Council really put their foot down. When he wouldn't bend the knee."

Cillian takes another slow drag of his smoke, looking out the window.

“Declan cut a deal with the FBI to lead them to Seamus so they could put him away in exchange for then turning a blind eye to any Kildare business here in New York.”

The room goes silent.

Shit. Now that’s a fucking tidbit I’ve never known.

Hades’ eyes narrow. “Are you fucking shitting—”

“I don’t condone ratting,” Cillian growls. “Not at *all*. But this was different. This was putting evil incarnate back in Pandora’s box. And Declan didn’t make the deal on his own. It was sanctioned by the Council, who viewed it as a last measure to put Seamus down.”

He shrugs.

“Anyway, that’s how—”

“That isn’t all.”

We all start, turning to see Dimitra standing in the doorway, looking grim, meeting Cillian’s gaze.

“That *isn’t* the end of the story, Mr. Kildare.”

Neve quails. Cillian’s jaw works as his eyes flicker with green fire.

“No, it’s not,” he hisses quietly. “Seamus got wind of what went down. He managed to break out of the first prison they had him in. Then the second, and…”

Neve’s face is turning to pure terror, her eyes dim and faraway, like she’s about to pass out again. I frown, stepping closer to her and dropping a hand

to her shoulder. She flinches violently, gasping and whipping her gaze to me.

“Didn’t mean to scare you,” I mutter quietly, snatching my hand away from her shoulder.

“Anyway, he was caught again,” Cillian says in a clipped tone, continuing his history lesson. “And *this* time, they threw his ass in ADX Florence and threw away the key. While in there, he’s put forty prisoners and seven guards in graves.”

You could have heard a pin drop as Cillian takes one final drag of his cigarette and stubs it out in a potted plant on the table next to the window. His eyes stab across the room through haze of the smoke.

“Seamus O’Conor isn’t the Devil. He’s who the Devil is smart enough to run and fucking hide from.”

Kratos whistles low, his face grim as he shakes his head.

“The man who came on the night of the wedding…”

Every eye in the room turns to Neve as she finally opens her mouth. I frown, and even though I have this weird pull to touch her—even just to put my hand on her arm or something—I resist.

“When he raised the gun, he said ‘*An Seiceadóir* says hello’.”

Cillian shoots her a look, but she ignores him.

“*An Seiceadóir* is Gaelic for The Executioner.”

My eyes snap to Cillian’s. And it’s right there all over his face.

He knew.

I see fucking red as I surge across the room, until I’m eye to eye with him.

“You *knew*,” I hiss dangerously. “You heard what that fucker said before I cut his throat.”

“Perhaps,” Cillian says quietly, that thin, lethal edge to his voice. “And?”

“And you didn’t think to fucking *say something*?!”

“I did,” he growls back. “Then I decided not to.”

“Why the *fuck* not?”

“Because it wasn’t Drakos business. It was Kildare business.”

“The whole point of this,” I snarl. “Was to *combine* our business—”

“It concerned things that *do not* concern you,” Cillian hisses. “And while I’m very grateful for the way you reacted, what happened at your wedding will not ever be repeated. That was Seamus’ *one* card, and I’m betting he’s been waiting to play it for years.”

My blood turns hot as my brow furrows.

“Why Neve?”

Cillian meets my eye, but his look gives nothing away.

“Answer me, you son of a—”

“*Mind your tone,* God of War,” he murmurs thinly.

“What if he gets out?” Calliope whispers, her face paling.

“He won’t.” Hades shakes his head. “It’s fucking ADX Florence. There’s a reason they call that place the Alcatraz of the Rockies. You don’t break out. No one has, and no one will, ever. It’s impossible.”

Castle and Cillian begin to squabble with my siblings about the security measures of the fucking prison, and how they might be compromised, and

Seamus, and his seeming ability to project his power outside the walls, like at the wedding reception.

I barely hear them. I can barely even fucking see straight through the rage and the fury throbbing inside of me, like a bomb on a timer about to go off.

Slowly it dawns on me that my rage isn't solely directed at Cillian for not telling me about the Seamus connection sooner, or about what the killer at the wedding said. I'm not angry because I wasn't *informed*, or because this whole connection to the Kildare family just got about ten times more lethal.

I'm angry because the idea of any harm coming to Neve is…

Confusion twists my insides.

Intolerable.

And that's a side effect of fake-marrying Neve Kildare I never saw coming.

"Ares."

Cillian, Castle, Eilish, and my sister have circled the wagons around Neve, with Dimitra looking on from a distance, her face still lined with concern, as Hades and Kratos take me aside.

"This is more than we signed up for," Hades hisses under his breath, turning to glare across the room at Cillian's back. "Like *way* fucking more."

"I agree." Kratos' jaw grinds. "Seamus O'Conor is a goddamn monster. Those fucking stories we used to make up as kids aren't that far off from the truth. If anything, they're tamer. You know what that motherfucker used to do to people?"

Hades frowns. "Yeah, *kill them*, Kratos. In large numbers."

Our other brother shakes his head. “I mean *how* he killed them.” His face darkens. “He used to string up the families of his hits and honest-to-fuck crucify them.”

My nose wrinkles in disgust before my eyes dart across the room.

To Neve.

“Fuck that,” Hades mutters. “Ares, this *really* isn’t what we bargained for. If that fucking freak has a debt he wants paid by the Irish, that should be between him and them alone. Now, there’s going to be a target on our backs too.”

I turn to level a cold look at him.

“And what exactly should we do about that, Hades?”

His jaw clenches.

“I’m just saying, if he’s after *Neve*…you know—”

He chokes as I grab him by the collar and slam him against the wall behind him.

“*Who is my WIFE*,” I snarl savagely. “In case you’ve forgotten that.”

Hades glares at me, knocking my hands away before straightening his shirt.

“*Chill*,” he mutters. “I was just saying.”

“Kindly do yourself a favor and never *just say* it again.”

He lifts a curious brow at me before his gaze darts to Neve. Then back to me.

“All right, all right,” he murmurs, putting up his hands in apology and eying me. “I didn’t mean shit, okay?”

I breathe slowly, nodding.

“I’m going to get Neve back to my place. Security here has been beefed up, yeah?”

Kratos nods. “Yeah, we’re good.”

I give both my bothers a firm hug before I go over to kiss Dimitra on the cheek.

“Nothing’s going to happen, Ya-ya.”

She lifts her eyes to mine. They’re dark and worried.

“He was the stuff of ghost stories for you and your friends,” she says quietly. “But I *lived through* that monster’s reign of terror in this city. Cillian isn’t wrong, *engonós*. Seamus O’Conor isn’t the Devil. He’s the one who sends the Devil running.”

My jaw tightens. “Well, you’re safe here. And he’s *not* getting out of Florence. It’s impossible. And this parole hearing nonsense?” I scowl and shake my head. “I’m going to call in some favors, just in case anyone on that parole board is criminally insane enough to even *consider* freeing that son of a bitch.”

She smiles nervously, patting my hand.

“Go home, Ares. Take care of your wife.”

As everyone starts to leave, Neve and I finally catch each other’s eye. She chews on her lip as I walk over to her.

“C’mon. Let’s go home and—”

“Can we…” Her brow knits. “Can we go for a drink or something?”

Are you fucking serious, woman?

“We can have a drink at my—our—place.”

“I know we can. I just…I’m going to feel trapped if we go straight home right now. I need to get *out*.”

“Neve—”

“Look, you lock your door and listen to death metal until your ears bleed when you need focus and escape, right?”

I smile wryly.

“Well, I need the hum of pub conversation around me and some whiskey in my hand.”

She looks up into my eyes, still chewing on her lip.

“That motherfucker is behind the most secure walls in the world, Ares. He’s not coming for me.”

“He *did* come for you.” My brow furrows. “And while we’re on the subject—”

“Can we get off it?”

I frown.

And while we’re on the subject, I’d like to know fucking WHY he’s coming for you, when you had fuck-all to do with his incarceration.

“Ares,” she sighs. “Please. I’m going to lose my fucking mind if we go home right away. I’m used to being out and about in the world. Can we *please* just grab a drink somewhere?”

My jaw grinds as I let the idea percolate in my head.

“Fine,” I finally grunt reluctantly. “Fine. But we’re bringing security.”

“As long as they keep their distance.”

I nod. Both of us go quiet.

“You understand I’m choosing to let *some* of these questions go. For *now*.”

Neve smiles a wan, crooked smile. She reaches out and squeezes my hand.

“*Thank you*.”

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ARES

THERE ARE Irish bars in New York, and there are *Irish* bars in New York. The former are full of kitschy "Irish" shit—fake vintage Guinness ads, shamrocks all over the place, the same four beers on tap. They make a fortune on St. Patrick's Day.

The latter is the kind of place you damn well better not step foot in unless you look the part and *are* the part.

Thankfully, The Banshee, where Neve insists on going, is the former. No old-school IRA types side-eying you or conversation coming to a dead stop when you walk in. No, this place is the Disney World version of an Irish pub, full of hipsters, finance dude bros, and regular day-to-day New Yorkers who felt like having Guinness or a whiskey tonight. It's got the kitschy four-leaf clover and *Erin go Bragh* shit on the walls, and modern indie rock music playing on the sound system.

I feel utterly out of place. Places with multiples TVs, guys in sports jerseys high-fiving each other whenever the right team scores, and a goddamn bell the hipster bartender keeps fucking ringing whenever someone orders a round of shots aren't exactly my kind of places. I prefer a more sophisticated drinking experience. A dress code. Dim lighting. Subdued. Elegant. Demure.

The Banshee, in the West Village, is the polar opposite of all that. Amusingly, it's also *so fucking Neve* that I can't help but grin and shake my head when we step inside.

"Grab one of those booths. I'll get us drinks."

Neve fades into the crowd, in her element, heading towards the bar. I shove aside a couple of loud Knicks fans and snag the last unclaimed dark green vinyl booth along the wall.

It's a bigger crowd than I'd like, given the day's events. But I've got men parked outside, and another one watching the back entrance to the alley. And again, that psycho motherfucker is locked up tight in the most secure prison in the world.

We're fine. Neve's mood and general color has improved on the drive over here. She doesn't look as cold and shut down as she did earlier. It's as if she's shaken off the shadow that's been looming over her since the TV broadcast.

My thoughts drift again to the place my head went when all that shit went down today. How my immediate reaction was to look to her. To make sure she was okay.

To protect her.

I wouldn't have expected that.

There's a part of me that wants to say that's just who I am. Or at least who I've become since ascending the throne. But that's a copout. That's the easy excuse.

It's also just plain fucking wrong.

Because I'm *not* that guy. Not unless the person in trouble is family. If it were Callie, or Ya-ya, or any of my brothers who was being threatened like that? I'd storm into Hell to make sure they were safe from harm. Of course I would. Aside from family, though, I can't think of a single other instance, especially a single other woman, where I've come close to even approaching this level of vicious protectiveness.

With Neve, it's stronger than anything I've ever felt. This need to shield her. To snarl at the world until it backs off when it gets too close. To scare away the shadows and keep the devils at bay.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I frown, shoving those thoughts away. Way too complex. Or at least, I'm way too sober to be diving into those waters right now. Instead, I let my mind wander to even earlier—before that monster on the TV. To dragging Neve into the guest bathroom.

To losing myself in her.

I grin wolfishly at the memory, turning to scan across the crowd, my gaze searching for her. My pulse quickens when I spot her bright gingery-red ponytail at the bar.

And then quickly, that surge of…*something*…inside me when I see her turns to something else. Something black.

Or maybe green.

My blood pressure spikes as I watch her throw her head back, laughing raucously at something the smug, hipster bartender with the tousled hair and the pretty-boy looks says. Neve grins widely, and I see fucking red when she leans over the bar and hugs the guy before lifting the drinks he sets down and wandering back over to our booth.

“I know your penthouse only has thousand-dollar a glass vintage scotch,” she snickers sarcastically as she slips into the booth across from from me. “But here, we drink Jameson.” Neve grins as she slides the glass of Irish whiskey on ice across the table to me. “*Sláinte*.”

Silently, darkly, still brooding over the confusing and unwanted feelings of such possessive jealousy, I pluck up my glass and down half of it. Neve lifts a brow, eyeing me as she sips hers slowly.

“Whoa, what’s going on?”

My eyes snap to hers.

“Who was that?”

Her brows knit. “Who was who?”

I turn my head, pointedly sliding my gaze across the pub to the shithead behind the bar.

Neve snorts a laugh, which only makes me want even more to walk over there and disfigure the guy.

“The bartender? Oh, that’s just Jack.”

My teeth grind.

“Who the fuck is *Jack*?”

Neve stares at me, a half confused, half amused look teasing her lips. “He’s the *bartender*.”

“To *you*, I mean,” I growl.

“*Ohh*!” She smiles broadly. “Oh, it’s nothing. I just used to be his personal porn star. You know, real filthy, no-holds-barred stuff. Shared with his friends, bukkake. That sort of thing.”

She’s grinning at me as my jaw grinds tightly. When I don’t flinch or smile back, hers falters slightly.

“I’m…joking…if that wasn’t clear?”

“Who. Is. He.”

Neve rolls her eyes. “Oh my God, seriously? He’s an old friend, *relax*. I grew up coming to this neighborhood all the time. I’ve known Jack since I used to come here with a fake ID in high school. *Chill*.”

I do my best to pull off a casual shrug as I glance back to Neve.

Who obviously isn’t buying it.

“Jesus,” she murmurs, smirking at me. “Imagine if we were a *real* couple. I’d have to start warning any men who even glance at me to run for their lives.”

A real couple.

I need to get my head on straight.

I down the rest of my drink and stand. “I’m going to use the restroom.”

“Careful,” she grins. “There’s no towel boy or shoe-shine in there. Think you’ll survive?”

I give her a look, biting back my grin when she giggles.

My nose wrinkles in disgust when I step into the bathroom. Graffiti covers the walls. It smells like fucking piss. And a single fluorescent bar-light flickers over a cracked mirror and grimy sink.

Jesus. This is why I drink at *classy* fucking bars.

I’m at the urinal when the door opens, and I hear two guys tumble in behind me.

“Bro, holy shit,” one snickers to the other. “You must be knee-deep in pussy working behind the bar in a place like this.”

I stiffen, my eyes laser focused on the scuffed-up tile wall in front of me.

The second man, who I’m guessing now is the infamous *Jack*, laughs as I hear him pissing into the stall toilet behind me.

“I mean it’s a tough gig, but someone’s gotta do it, right?”

The first guy wheezes out a guffaw. “Man, I gotta come here more often at this time of night.”

“Yeah bro, the talent gets unreal this late sometimes.”

“Dude!” guy number one blurts. “You see Neve Kildare out there?”

Jack whistles. “Sure did. She’s lookin’ great, too.”

I grit my teeth. Then I remind myself that it’s not a crime for another man to find my fake, arranged marriage wife attractive.

If he keeps talking, though, I might just commit one.

“Who’s the tightass douchebag she’s with?”

Jack snorts. “I dunno, man. Could be some sort of mafia thing. You know her family.”

“Yeah, true.” The second guy snickers. “Well, whoever he is, hope he’s got a second cock.”

They both crack up, loudly.

“*Two dicks bare KILDARE*!”

Both of them crow it out practically at the same time as my vision starts to tint red. Slowly I zip up, moving to the sink to wash my hands. In the cracked mirror, I can see Jack stepping out of the stall and the second guy taking a piss in the urinal I just vacated.

“Man!” Jack laughs. “I can’t believe you and Leery did that shit with her that night.”

The second guy chuckles as he finishes taking a piss. “Dude, she was so fuckin’ wasted. We should’ve brought in the whole fuckin’ football team and run a train on—”

They both go silent when I reach over and deadbolt the bathroom door shut with a harsh clicking sound.

“Dude, what are you—”

I start to roll up my sleeves.

The unnamed second guy clears his throat. “Hey, buddy, can we help you? What—”

They both stiffen when I turn to face them, realization of me being “that tightass douchebag with Neve” dawning in their eyes.

“Look, bro—”

“Say it again.”

Jack swallows. He and the other guy glance at each other nervously.

“Wh—What?”

“Say what you just said again,” I growl quietly. “About Neve Kildare.”

Impossibly, they go even more pale.

“Look, man,” the second guy looks at me nervously. “It was a long time ag—”

I move towards him. He flinches, stumbling back until he hits a wall.

“It was just some pictures, man! No harm, no—”

My fist slams into his stomach, doubling him over as he cries out in pain. When he tries to stand up again, I hit him in the face so hard I feel his nose shatter under my fist. He screams in pain, blood pouring down his face.

I hit him again.

And again.

And again.

I hit him until the throbbing, snarling, vicious god of wrath inside of me retreats enough that I don’t actually kill him. It’s only then that I stop. My shoulders heave, my teeth bared as I spit at the piece of shit blubbering in a pool of his own piss and blood on the bathroom floor.

I turn to Jack, who’s now pressed to the far corner of the bathroom, a look of abject terror on his face.

“*What* was he talking about.”

“Look, man,” Jack blurts. “I’ve worked here a long time. I don’t want any trouble—”

“Then *start. Talking.*”

“There was a party!” he mumbles, shaking. “Like, five years ago. I wasn’t even there, I just…”

“*Talk.*”

“A bunch of people Neve went to high school with still come in here. I mean they all used to party here with fake IDs back in school, so this is still their spot. And, you know, I hear stories…”

“*Tell me*,” I rasp coldly.

He flinches, shivering as he eyes me warily.

“You guys really married?”

“I’m not going to ask you again.”

“Someone took pictures!” he blurts as I step towards him.

Savage fury rips through me.

Pictures.

“*What. Fucking. Pictures*.”

I’m fucking *seething*—a bubbling, shaking bomb of napalm about to detonate and take out a whole city block.

“Just…him and another guy!” Jack snivels, cringing deeper into the corner. “That’s all I know! I’ve never seen them! I’ve just heard…”

“*WHAT*.”

Jack swallows, his face ashen.

“Apparently there were pictures…of like, her and them.”

His gaze drops away from mine. His hands are shaking.

“Like, pictures of her…*with* them.”

In one motion, I whirl, wind back, and kick the piece of shit on the floor as hard as I can in the ribs. Jack winces when I wind back again. I do so *very*

much want to hurt him. I want to hurt the world right now.

But I restrain myself. I leave the two of them shaking and sniveling in the bathroom, and I storm out and back into the bar.

Neve looks up from her empty glass as I approach like a fucking demon from hell. Her smile drops, and her brow furrows.

“What’s—”

“We’re fucking leaving.”

“What? Ares, we just got here—”

“Yes. And now we’re fucking *leaving*,” I snarl viciously, grabbing her wrist and yanking her after me.

It’s not until we get outside that she manages to free her arm from my grasp, pulling away from me. When I turn back to her, she holds a hand up, shaking her head.

“Okay, what the *fuck*? You go to the bathroom for five minutes and come out looking like you’re ready to kill someone.” Her gaze drops to my bloodied knuckles. Her eyes widen. “What the hell happened to your—”

“I don’t own your past, Neve,” I hiss quietly. “But I don’t need to fucking hear about it in pub bathrooms. We’re going home. *Now*.”

Her brow furrows.

“What *past*?”

“Let’s *go*.”

“No!” She plants her feet, glaring at me. “Because I have no idea what the hell you’re talking about! My *past*?! Ares, while you were out probably

fucking half of London, I've had *one* fucking boyfriend, okay?! One incredibly lackluster, G-rated, vanilla—"

"I don't need to hear about my wife getting fucking tag-teamed by—"

Her face goes white. Then, it turns livid.

"*Thank you so much*," she hisses quietly.

"Yeah?" I snap. "For fucking *what*?"

"For reminding me of one of the worst moments of my life, you *asshole*! I just *love* rehashing the time I got assaulted while I was blackout drunk. Thanks *so* much, Ares."

Fuck.

She starts to storm away down the sidewalk. When I catch up to her and grab her arm, she turns on me as she yanks free of my grip.

"Neve—"

"Neve *nothing! Okay?!*"

"The fuck it is. Tell me."

She shudders, tears in her eyes.

"Did they ra—"

"*No*."

She shakes her head decisively, chewing viciously on her lip. Her eyes raise to mine, a look in them I can't quite decipher.

"When I was nineteen, I was at a party with a bunch of people I'd gone to high school with. I didn't even drink that much. Maybe I got slipped

something, got roofied, I don’t know. All I know is, the next day, there were…*pictures*.”

A red mist swims into my vision. Neve hugs herself, looking away.

“These two assholes I knew from high school, Mike Jennings and Greg Leery, took pictures of me while I was blacked out.”

“What sort of pictures,” I growl.

Neve’s eyes close, and she swallows thickly.

“Up my skirt. With my shirt pulled up.”

The rest mist turns into a cloud of death. My hands curl to fists at my sides as my teeth grind.

Neve looks away.

“And few of them with their…” she shakes her head, her lip thinning to a line. “With their dicks out, like, waving them near my face and stuff.”

In one motion, I whip around, crashing my fist into the stop sign behind me so hard it dents in half. When I turn back to her, her face is still, her eyes locked on mine.

“What was the fallout?”

She shakes her head. “There was none.”

I’m going to kill them.

“I mean, yeah, sort of, a little. Greg’s father and mine were going into business together. So, you know…”

I stare at her in sickening disbelief.

“So *nothing happened*?!”

Her mouth goes small.

“Greg’s dad wrote a big check.”

“I mean to the two shitheads who assaulted you.”

Neve looks away again. “Look, Ares, it’s long in the past. And the pictures weren’t digital, thank *God*. They used one of those disposable things—”

“Stay here.”

“Ares, wait—”

But I’m already storming back into The Banshee. And instantly, I see the piece of shit I just stomped on in the bathroom, now sitting slumped on a barstool nursing a beer with a bloody icepack to his face.

I don’t even have to push the crowds aside. It’s like I’ve just walked in wielding an axe, or a baseball bat. The whole crowd parts for me as I surge towards him. The little fuck turns around on his stool, his eyes going wide in horror as he tries to scramble away.

Too late.

He squeals like a stuck pig as I grab him by the collar, yank him off the stool, and physically drag him back through the bar. Outside, he’s already pleading for his life when I shove him down at Neve’s feet.

Her face goes white.

“*Mike*?” Her gaze snaps to mine. “What the fuck is—”

“Neve!” Mike blubbers, sobbing on the ground. “Please! Tell him! Tell him it was just a prank, right? I mean we were fucking *kids*! Kids do dumb pranks, don’t they?!”

“Is this one of them?” I hiss quietly.

Her eyes drop to the man sobbing on the ground. I half expect her to tell me it's fine. Or lie. Or do something very "Neve-ish" like swearing at him and then telling me we should go, and then leaving it at that.

But instead, her jaw clenches, and slowly, I see the same look spread over her face that I saw when I watched her turn into the dark queen she is, when she was dressing Ezio down at the party.

"Yeah," she hisses. "This is Mike Jennings. He's one of the *assholes* who took advantage of me when I was drunk, maybe even drugged me. And then took pictures of his fucking dick next to my face."

Her eyes raise to mine, a look of pure malice in them.

"Don't kill him."

Three words, with the unspoken next ones being "but do what you will."

"I'll try my best."

I've doled out some hurt in my day. I've sent men to the hospital, and plenty more to their graves. In other words, I've meted out my fair share of beatdowns.

This is one for the record books, though.

I hit the sack of shit sniveling on the sidewalk over and over and fucking *over*. I hit him with every ounce of my rage, every drop of my fury for what he did to her all those years ago. I hit him even when the random passersby on the street scream at me to stop. I shrug off the two guys who try and stop me, shoving them back with a bloodthirsty snarl on my lips before I turn and continue to turn Mike into a piece of bloody, tenderized meat.

And I'd probably have kept pulverizing him until he was a fucking corpse, if it wasn't for the soft hand that suddenly touched my cheek. I flinch,

turning with savageness in my eyes.

Only to realize it’s Neve.

“Ares,” she says quietly. “We have to go.”

“I’m not done with—”

“The police are coming.”

She nods at a frantic woman across the street, screaming the address we’re standing outside of into a phone.

“We have to *go*. Now.”

I drop my grip on an unconscious Mike’s collar. My eyes are still locked with Neve’s as I turn and cup her face.

Possessively. Jealously. Unflinchingly.

The moment is frozen like that for I don’t even know how long—both of us just staring into each other’s eyes on that sidewalk outside The Banshee.

Then we go.

But something’s different as we jog around the corner and get into the waiting car. Something’s changed as we drive wordlessly through the city back to my penthouse.

Or at least, *I’m* different.

Because I left the version of me who was still telling himself that there was anything *pretend* about any of this back there in the puddles of blood on that sidewalk.

My hand slides across the back seat. My fingers entwine with hers, squeezing tight.

And she squeezes them back as we drive into the night.

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NEVE

AT A CERTAIN POINT, as the car is winding up Tenth Avenue, his hand slides across the back seat to mine. Our fingers thread together, and I shiver when I feel him take my hand and give it a comforting squeeze.

We're silent on the drive home.

I'm stunned and more than slightly horrified at what I've just witnessed. When I replay the way Ares dragged an already bloodied Mike out of The Banshee and proceeded to beat the ever-living shit out of him right there on the sidewalk, I can't tell which of the two ways my gut is pulling me.

On the one hand—horribly—I'm turned on. I'm *excited* and aroused by the savageness I just witnesses. The totally unbridled fury of the man next to me. The man who dresses in elegant, tailored suits. Who rules an empire with a level head and an unflinching concentration.

But also a man that I just watched turn into an animal, complete with snarling teeth and bloodlust in his eyes. The fact that it was all for *me*—for my "honor"—somehow makes it even hotter. I know, I know…fighting for a woman's honor is a ridiculously antiquated and more than slightly sexist concept.

But it was still hot as *sin* to watch.

On the other hand, it’s the polar opposite. The other way my gut pulls me, when I think back to the brutality I just saw on that sidewalk, is toward *fear*.

And that’s as real as the attraction to that lethal brutality.

I’m caught somewhere between two damnations. Half of me very much desires the man who just almost killed someone in front of me with his bare hands. The other half very well might be terrified of the man I’m married to. Of the darkness and the savagery in him that I’ve only fully grasped tonight.

“Neve.”

I flinch, startled.

“What?”

“We’re home.”

INSIDE, I linger in the living room as Ares stalks off down the hallway towards the bedroom. I look down at my hands, and I shiver, my breath catching.

There’s blood on them. Mike’s blood, now smeared on my skin from holding Ares’ hand in the car over here. I feel a horrible rolling sensation in my stomach as I rush for the kitchen sink. Shivering, a cold knot in my stomach, I quickly fill and then down a glass of water to steady my stomach.

Shit.

There’s blood on the glass now, too.

Shuddering, I start to wash it in the sink, scrubbing it clear of the blood before setting it on the drying rack. The water is still running as I look down at my hands.

Immediately, I start to scrub them hard, over and over, until they're raw from hot water and soap and I'm sure every molecule of blood is gone. It's only then that I turn off the water and grip the edge of the marble countertop.

Out, damned spot.

I may have just washed the literal blood from my hands. But that doesn't make them clean. I've been pushing the notion into the far recesses of my head the whole way home. But it's not going away, even if I've been choosing not to think about it.

"It", as in what I said to Ares right before he beat Mike to a bloody pulp in front of me.

I could have lied, and said it was a different Mike. I almost *did*. I mean, I hate that fucker for doing what he and Greg did to me that night. They might not have actually raped me. But they still violated me.

I knew damn well what was implied when Ares asked, "is this one of them". He was looking for me to sign off on Mike's punishment. To co-sign his beatdown.

I could've walked away. Denied it was Mike. But I didn't.

In fact, I very much *did* sign off on it.

"*Don't kill him.*"

We both damn well knew what that meant. *Don't kill him, but hurt him*. Hurt him badly, even. And worse, I didn't mean "don't kill him because he

doesn’t deserve it” or “because I don’t want that for him”. It was because that seemed like a bridge too far in terms of potential fallout or legal repercussions.

I tremble as I look down at my hands. Again, clean…but not clean at the same time.

My eyes close as I take a shaky intake of breath.

My hands are dirty. *And I’m okay with that*.

I swallow as I walk across the still-dark penthouse, towards the windows with New York and the Hudson River spread out before me. Then I hear the pad of Ares’ footsteps coming up behind me. I can feel and hear him walking closer, until I know he’s only a few feet away.

“What was that?” I whisper quietly, not turning around.

“What was—”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“That,” he growls. “Was me defending what’s *mine*.”

I stiffen, shivering as I start to turn.

“I’m not your—”

My eyes bulge, my words trailing off and then failing completely.

Ares is naked, his grooved, chiseled body glistening and dripping wet from a shower. His cock hangs thick and heavy and powerful between his sculpted, muscled thighs.

“I—”

I whimper as he closes the distance between us, gasp as he pins me hard to the glass at my back and cups my jaw possessively.

“And I will always defend—and never fucking apologize for defending—what’s *mine*.”

A heated shivers curls and teases through my core. My pulse thuds as I look up defiantly into his eyes.

“And again, I’m *not* your—”

“The fuck you aren’t.”

His mouth descends to mine so hard it hurts. So hard that his lips bruise me, and take my breath away, and almost bring me to my knees just from the heat in it.

I moan into him, shuddering and clinging to him as I lose myself in his lips. His tongue assaults my mouth, destroying any possible defenses I have left as it plunges inside. I whimper as I kiss him right back, my tongue dancing with his as I feel him yank the straps of my dress from my shoulders.

I gasp, my hand sliding into his thick hair and gripping tightly as his mouth drags hotly down my jaw to my neck. He growls, biting me hard as I yelp in a mixture of pleasure and pain. He groans into my skin, lapping at the tender place where he’s just bitten as I moan eagerly.

He yanks the dress down, peeling it over my breasts until my nipples are dragging electrically over his bare chest. The dress slips from my hips, dropping to a puddle at my feet.

I’m still not wearing panties. Not since hours ago, when he ripped them off me while fucking me like an animal in the bathroom and gagged me with them.

Heat and reckless desire surge through me like liquid fire. The two halves of me are at war with each other—the one side terrified of the savagery barely contained in this man, the other utterly and completely electrified and turned on by him.

As his teeth rake over my skin, and his powerful hands lift me by the waist to pin me against the glass, and as my thighs spread around his grooved hips, I realize I don't have to pick a side.

I can have both. With him, it'll *always* be both.

Power and lust.

Fear and excitement.

Sin and salvation.

I choke, cooing softly and eagerly when I feel his thick, swollen head slip between my lips.

"Are you dripping wet because of me, or because of what I did in front of you?"

I shudder, choking on my own breath as his eyes stab through the darkness of the penthouse into mine. It's as if he's been reading my thoughts. Has been inside of my head this whole time, hearing everything.

"I…I don't know what you—"

"*Yes you do*," he growls.

I cry out as he teases, dragging his cock up and down my lips until I'm shaking all over.

"Is your pretty pussy dripping wet for *me*, because you want me to stop teasing you and fuck you senseless with every hard inch of this thick cock?"

I shudder, whimpering as my eyes roll back.

“Or are you this fucking wet and messy for me because watching me let go, watching me drop the facade concealing the savagery inside of me, makes you want to get fucked harder than you’ve ever been fucked in your life?”

My mouth falls open in a whining, pleading, desperately eager moan as he sinks his head into me.

“*Or*,” he rasps into my neck. “Or maybe it’s—”

“*Both*!” I blurt the word shamefully, shuddering and trembling as I feel him groan into my neck. His teeth drag across my skin until I feel him nip at my ear.

“*Bad fucking girl*.”

Oh fuck yes.

He drives balls-deep into me with one thrust of his hips, burying every inch of his gorgeous cock inside. I cry out, my thighs clamping around his hips and my eyes rolling back. My head lolls against the glass, my nails raking his back as Ares pulls all the way out and then rams right back into me.

I moan as he grabs my wrists, keeping me pressed to the window with his body and his cock. He pins my wrists above my head, and I whimper as his lips crush to mine. His hips roll, driving in and out of me, fucking me against the window as he keeps my hands immobilized.

“Does this feel *real* enough for you?” he snarls darkly into my ear.

I shudder, gasping as he starts to fuck me even harder and more mercilessly. And I know exactly what he’s referring to.

“Imagine if we were real couple.”

“Ares—”

“I want you to fucking listen to me.”

He grinds into me, making me whimper and moan.

“This may have started as a political alignment. But make no fucking mistake,” he rasps. “*You* are fucking *mine*.”

My core tightens. My body begins to melt against him, my pulse roaring as my eyes roll back in pleasure.

“You’re fucking *mine*, Neve,” he growls savagely, pounding into me until my whole world starts to dissolve into pure ecstasy.

“And you can go ahead and warn any man you see not to even fucking look at you. They’d damn well better fucking listen. Because if they don’t?”

I cry out as one hand pinning my wrists moves down and digs into my hip. The other slides down my body, pinching and twisting one of my nipples before his fingers wrap around my throat. My eyes bulge, my body instantly rippling with pleasure as I start to peak.

“*If they don’t*,” he snarls, I’ll put a hole through their chests and fuck you in front of them while they bleed out, so their last goddamn thoughts on this earth are knowing *how fucking MINE you are*.”

And suddenly, I let go of the notion that getting turned on by Ares’ savageness and brutality tonight is “wrong” or makes me fucked up. I mean, maybe it *is* wrong and *does* make me fucked up.

But what hits me like a ton of bricks is that I simply *do not care*.

I embrace it. I give in to the wrong. To the savageness. To the filthy. And I give in to the pure hedonism of being fucked to within an inch of my life by the very god of war himself.

My thighs clamp around his hips tightly as his fingers squeeze my throat just enough to make everything *more*. Every growl against my ear turns me to liquid fire. Every brush of his lips against my skin feels like pure sin. And every thrust of his gorgeous cock feels like he's fucking my very soul.

"*Come for me*," he rasps into my ear. "Come for me knowing I'll burn the goddamn world down just to have you in the ashes."

My vision dims. My eyes roll back as the wave begins to sweep me up and crash down over me.

"Come for me knowing I'll fucking *kill for you*. But most of all, Neve," he snarls, ramming his cock so fucking deep that I crash over the edge.

"Come for me because you're fucking *mine*."

It takes me a second to realize the wail I'm hearing in my ears is me, crying out as my entire body erupts for him. My ankles lock around his hips. My breath chokes as his fingers squeeze. My skin feels like it's been electrified and then set ablaze as my body grinds against his.

The orgasm explodes deep in my core, incinerating me from the inside out as I cling to him for dear life. Ares groans, biting down hard on my neck and sending me spiraling into orbit before his mouth crushes to mine again.

His cock pulses thickly inside of me, and I moan as I feel his cum spilling deep—over and over and *over*.

I'm dimly aware of his hand leaving my throat. Of being carried all the way into the bedroom with my legs still wrapped around him, his cock still buried in me to the hilt. Of him finally sliding out of me, and of his cum dripping down my thighs as he flips me onto my stomach on the bed and slides on top of me.

Of the delicious and sinfully hot feeling of him sinking his still-hard cock deep into me from behind and taking me again. And of coming, over and over again, until the sun begins to crest.

But he’s still not done.

I’m still not done.

We’re just getting started.

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THE RECEPTIONIST SMILES politely but warily at me across the desk.

“I’m sorry sir. Councilman Leery is *extremely* busy. I’m afraid you’ll need to make an appointment and come back lat—*sir*!”

Fuck it. I made a passing effort at doing this the nice way. But the not-so-nice way is *so much* more fun.

“Sir!”

I ignore the receptionist’s protests, blowing right past her and yanking open the door to his office. The Councilman looks up quickly from his desk, his brows knitting in confusion.

“Sir! You can’t just—” the receptions glares past me at her boss. “I’m sorry, Councilman Leery, he just—”

“He’ll buzz you when he needs you.”

I shut the door firmly in her face and lock it. Shame Leery couldn’t see into the future to do that before I arrived.

Slowly, I turn to smile a sharp, predatory smile at Councilman Leery. Also known as *Greg Leery*.

The same Greg Leery who went to school with Neve. The same Greg Leery who, alongside Mike fucking Jennings, got her drunk, or roofied, or whatever, and then used a Polaroid camera to take predatory pictures of her unconscious body. Up her skirt. With her shirt pulled up.

Of his fucking *dick* wagging next to her face, like a complete fucking degenerate.

Today, that same Greg Leery is *Councilman* Leery, whose Manhattan district includes the Lower East Side, SoHo, the South Street Seaport, TriBeCa, and Washington Square. Not too shabby.

He's currently looking at me like I've got three heads. Until slowly, realization hits him and that dumb fucking confused look on his face drops like a brick as he connects the dots. He starts to pale.

"*Hang on—*"

"Do you know who I am?"

He swallows, his face turning the color of ash.

"*I asked you a question*."

Greg opens his mouth and immediately snaps it shut again. It's pretty clear he's heard about his little pal Mike's visit to the ER two nights ago. And I'm guessing coming face-to-face with the grim fucking reaper—aka, *me*—has him about a nanosecond away from shitting his pants.

"Look, I—I'm not looking for trouble—"

"Well, that's a shame."

I smile thinly as I cross the office until I'm standing over his desk, glaring down at him.

“Because you just found it.”

He’s too busy staring up into my face in horror to see the windup coming. My fist slams into his face, knocking him sideways out of his chair and to the floor as he bleats in terror. I storm around to his side of the desk just as he’s struggling to get up. Another fist to the face knocks his ass right back down.

I’m not done. Hell, I’m just getting started.

I hit Leery a third time, making sure he’s a sniveling, writhing worm on the ground before I do what comes next.

Which is to unzip my pants and pull out my cock.

Greg’s face turns white, his eyes wide in horror as he looks up at me.

“Woah! *WOAH,* man! Chill! I’m not gay or any—”

The back of my hand cracks him across the jaw.

“Shut the *fuck* up.”

I glare down at him as I wave my dick in his face.

“Doesn’t feel good, does it? To have intimacy forced on you when you don’t want it. Or when you *can’t say* if you want it or not.”

Leery swallows, looking like he’s going to be sick.

“Look, I was a kid, man. We were drinking—”

“Come up with another pathetic excuse and I swear to God I will throw you out the window.”

His mouth snaps shut.

“The pictures,” I growl.

When Greg doesn’t say anything, I roll my eyes as I tuck myself back in and zip up.

“Now would be a good time to start talking, shithead.”

He shakes his head vigorously.

“They’re gone!” he blurts. “I burned them years ago! I swear!”

I want to believe him. I *so* want to believe him. Because it would make this so much easier. But there’s no fucking way he’s telling the truth.

I’ve done my homework on Greg. He comes from a long line of politically-minded scumbags who are willing to do whatever it takes to seize power. He’s got a great-uncle who did time for fraud and embezzlement in New Jersey. Another cousin in jail right now in Florida, for accepting bribes as a state senator.

And as much as I want to think of Greg himself as a moron and a fuckhead, he’s actually *not* stupid. An undergraduate degree at Harvard can be bought. That, and the fact that his father attended, would have made Greg a shoo-in for admission even if he was dumb as a sack of hammers. But he’s not, and he aced Harvard. He was also near the top of his class when he got his law degree at Georgetown.

Bottom line: Greg is smart, and *way* too politically savvy, and having potential dirt on the Kildare family is worth *far* too much. He’s much too insidiously power-hungry to let something like that go.

“If I have to ask you again, Greg, I’m cutting off your balls.”

His eyes bulge. “I swear to *God*—”

He shrieks when I grab him by the collar, drag him up, and shove him over his desk. I yank his pants and boxers down, and Councilman Gregory Leery

just about has a heart attack when I whip out a switchblade and rest the edge against the underside of his shriveled balls.

“Oh God! Oh God! Oh God, *please*—!”

“*Greg*. Now would be a good time to start telling the—”

“The safe!” He blurts, sobbing. “The safe! In the bottom of that hutch, by the window!”

I sigh slowly. “I’m disappointed, Greg.”

“*Please*!” he bawls. “Please! I’m *so fucking sorry*! I—”

“Go over and open it. Now.”

He about trips over himself scuffling over with his pants down around his ankles. He swings open the bottom section of the hutch to reveal a safe and quickly dials in the combination to open it. A second later, he’s stumbling and falling over his pants again to shove a manila envelope into my hands.

Slowly, I raise my eyes to his.

“These are the *only* ones?”

He nods violently, a shell of a man, tears welling in his eyes.

“I swear to *God*, man!”

“If you’re lying, the next blade I bring to your pathetic dick will be a chainsaw. Understand?”

Greg about breaks his own neck, he’s nodding so fast.

“Greg, I’m giving you a job. Today never happened. Two nights ago with your little pal Mike never happened, either. And I’m putting *you* in charge of keeping it that way, by whatever means necessary. Got it?”

He nods even faster. “Of course!” His brow furrows. “But I mean, Mike…”

“It's now *your job* to keep the both of you silent. I don’t give a fuck how you do it. Understood?”

“Of course, Mr. Drakos.”

I turn to leave, then pause.

“Oh, and Greg?”

“Yeah?”

I spin back and break his nose with my already-bruised knuckles. He chokes, crying out and stumbling backwards as he clutches his gushing face.

“If you ever speak to, talk about, look at, come near, or even *think* about my wife again, I’ll be back, and I *will* be leaving with your balls in a jar.”

I don’t wait for a response before I’m out the door.

NEVE LOOKS up from the book she’s been reading on the couch when I walk in. I nod at the paperback in her hand quizzically, and she raises it to show me.

“*Fucked Sideways*. I’ve read it like nine times, but I *love* Bastian Pierce.”

I shake my head, smiling to myself. “You do know he fucked one of his students, right?”

Neve rolls her eyes. “He *married* one of his students.”

“Okay?”

She sticks her tongue out at me. “*I* think it’s romantic.”

Her eyes drop to my hand, and her face tenses.

“Ares…” Neve’s face lifts to mine. “There’s blood on your—”

“Come with me.”

She frowns as I walk across the penthouse and slide open the glass door to the spacious patio, but follows. Outside I open the lid to the fire pit, turn on the gas, and then drop in a lit match. The flames bloom hot and flickering as she stands next to me.

“What are we…”

I pull the envelope from my jacket and show it to her. Neve frowns.

“What is that?”

“The last of them.”

“Last of wh—”

Her face goes white, and she swallows heavily as she drags her eyes back to mine.

“*Greg*?” she breathes quietly.

I nod.

“He was keeping them as leverage, I think.”

She nods and shivers, hugging herself.

“Did you…?”

“No.”

No, I didn’t look at them.

She nods quietly.

“Thanks. Do you… I mean, could I…?”

I hand her the envelope. I watch as she opens it and pulls out a Polaroid. Revulsion, hatred, and shame flood her face before I reach out and cup her chin.

“Whenever you’re ready,” I murmur.

She nods, swallowing as she takes one more look through the photographs in her hand before shoving them back in the envelope. She turns her eyes to the fire roaring in front of us and in one motion drops them into the flames.

Her hand finds mine, our fingers intertwining. We stand together, watching the envelope catch fire, and then the flickering neon colors of Polaroid chemicals as they curl to molten slag.

Slowly, Neve turns and sinks into me, wrapping her arms around me and hugging me close.

“Thank you,” she whispers into my chest as I embrace her back.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

“Well, I’m going to anyway.”

Because of course she is. She’s incapable of just letting it be *without* making a snappy comeback or otherwise getting in the last word.

I’m slowly realizing just how much I like that about her.

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NEVE

"ARE YOU OKAY?"

"*Fuck*!" I blurt, jolting at the sound of Eilish's voice the second I walk in the door.

She gives me a sheepish look. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Did you see my texts?"

"No."

She frowns. "Really?" Her eyes drop pointedly to my hand, which is holding my phone.

Heat creeps into my face.

"Sorry, I've had a lot on my mind. I didn't even look at this thing the whole ride over."

Because I was still shivering and aching in the best way possible from the frankly animalistic sex I had with Ares just before coming over here. One moment, I was getting out of the shower wrapped in a towel to brush my teeth. The next moment, he barged right in, ripped the towel off, bent me over the vanity, and told me to "watch myself get fucked like a bad girl."

Yeah.

I'm literally still wet thinking about that. Which is why I spent the whole drive over here staring out the back seat window, completely ignoring my phone.

I smile weakly at my sister. "What's up?"

Her lips twist. "I heard Mike Jennings went to the hospital."

I swallow, try to keep my face neutral. "Oh?"

"Yeah, somebody beat the shit out of him."

"Huh. Well, fuck him."

"Oh, agreed. But I was just…" She lifts a brow. "You know. Wondering."

"Wondering?"

"Was this… You know, *you*?"

I smile curiously at Eilish. "Did *I* accost Mike Jennings outside The Banshee and beat him to a bloody pulp? No, Eilish. Sorry. I'm not secretly Batman—"

"I never said it happened at The Banshee."

Shit.

I don't even try to backpedal. We're too close for me to try, and it's pretty clear Eilish already has an idea what happened.

"I—"

"Good," she mutters quietly. "I'm glad Ares put him in the hospital. Should have happened five years ago. But, you're okay?"

I smile wryly and nod. “Actually, yeah. It’s…”

“Closure?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

She grins. “Hey, Castle is taking me over to the Columbia campus for a tour. Wanna come with?”

Eilish is also currently at NYU, finishing her undergrad degree. But she’s just received pre-acceptance at the ultra-competitive Columbia School of Business for grad school. Because she’s a smartypants like that.

“Nah, you go ahead.”

“You sure? That kick-ass Pho place you like is right around the corner.”

I turn to Castle. “I’m sure. You two have fun. Cillian wanted to talk to me anyway.”

Castle nods, and then raises a brow.

“Should I be sending a thank you wine and cheese basket to your husband for what I think I should?”

I make a zipping motion across my lips. He smiles grimly.

“*Gotcha*. Fuck those little shit-stains.”

“So I hear Councilman Leery got tuned up pretty good the other day.”

“Really? Did he?”

Cillian grins. “In his own office, even. Fancy that.”

“Wow. Maybe he tripped?”

My uncle smirks.

“God of War, I presume?”

I lift a non-committal shoulder.

“*Good*,” he growls. “That’s something your father should have done five years ago.”

My brow furrows. “Wait. You…knew about that?”

“I did.”

My face burns as I look away.

“You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed or ashamed about, Neve,” he mutters. “Those little shits got what was coming to them—well, actually, in my humble opinion, they only got about one *third* of what should have been coming to them. But it’s a good start.”

He slips a cigarette between his lips and then glances at me.

“You mind?”

I shake my head before he lights it with a flick of his Zippo.

“Your father and I…*disagreed* on certain things here and there.”

“I know.”

Cillian smiles quietly at me.

He knows I know, intimately.

“What happened with Leery and Jennings…that’s something we were polar opposites on. But it fell under family business, not *business* business, which

is why I allowed it to play out the way it did back then. But in hindsight I've always regretted not doing more at the time. I want you to know that."

I smile at him, shaking my head. "It wasn't on you to do anything. And you've done *plenty* for me," I add with a small shiver.

Cillian nods, obviously knowing what I'm talking about. He eyes me thoughtfully as he slowly drags on his smoke.

"He doesn't know, does he? Ares, I mean. About the full history with O'Conor."

I shake my head.

"No," I murmur. "Why, should he?"

Cillian shakes his head. "That's not what I meant. It's not about strategy or business. It's for *you* to tell him or not."

"It might help, given what's going on. You know, some context?"

His brow furrows. "There's plenty of other *context* to take Seamus and his threats seriously. I only asked out of curiosity, not to push you to do anything, Neve." He frowns a little deeper. "I've already asked far too much of you anyway."

I smile, shaking my head.

"It's not like you banished me to the moon or locked me in prison, you know."

"No, but I had my niece marry a man she's considered an enemy of her family for most of her life, without her consent, and without even a say in the matter."

“I’ll expect a lavish and outrageously expensive Christmas present to make up for it.”

He chuckles quietly. “How *is* the god of war, anyway?”

My mind instantly flashes back to my breath fogging the bathroom mirror, to my fingers clawing at the marble as Ares’ hands gripped my ass and tangled in my hair. To his body grinding into mine as his thick, gorgeous cock fucked me over the edge of my sanity until I came screaming his name.

“Fine,” I mumble. “He’s fine.”

He lifts a brow, but he doesn’t push it.

Probably a good thing.

There’s a quiet knock at the office door and Owen Foley opens it and sticks his head in. He beams at me as Cillian nods, beckoning him over. Owen takes a seat next to me and reaches over to pat my hand. Cillian clears his throat.

“I wanted to discuss the bloodthirsty elephant in the room, so to speak. And I thought Owen should sit in.”

I nod, smiling at the older man next to me.

“Look, bottom line, my dear,” Owen shrugs. “That prick in Colorado isn’t going *anywhere*. I don’t want you losing sleep over all the psycho shit he pulled on live TV the other day.”

I smile weakly. “Oh, I’m not worried.”

Hand on heart, I’m a *little* worried. Not jumping at my own shadows or checking the closets before bed worried. But that omnipresent, lingering

dim cloud of worry. Like the same background noise worry you have about getting skin cancer, or being hit by a car.

Okay, maybe it's more like somewhere in between.

"Good. Don't be," Owen scowls. "I've got a few…*friends* in the Justice Department, as well as the Federal Marshals. Seamus is in solitary under twenty-four-hour observation. He's now officially the most heavily-guarded inmate in the country."

Cillian nods. "I'm going to ask Ares to double up his security at the penthouse nonetheless."

I frown. "Even with all *that*?"

"There's never any harm in being overly cautious. This marriage makes both families stronger. But also angers our enemies, who might see it as a power grab."

"Which it is."

He grins at me, nodding. "Which it is. In addition, Owen's people are going to be helping out with security on our end, and his contacts in Florence ADX will be keeping an extra sharp eye on that fucking maniac. I'm also calling in my own favors to make sure this obscene parole hearing gets denied."

"I OWE YOU AN APOLOGY."

Our meeting is over, and Owen's just left. I glance up curiously at Cillian as he hands me a drink.

"For?"

His face darkens. “For fifteen years ago.”

“No,” I shake my head. “No, I owe you—”

“I should never have asked you to do what I did, Neve,” he mutters quietly. “I had no right. You were a fucking child.”

I swallow.

“It put the monster away, didn’t it?”

He nods.

“So I’m okay with it.”

I stare into the middle distance, taking a sip of my drink. “There’s nothing to apologize for. I owe you so much—”

“You don’t ever have to thank me.”

But I do.

Because I owe Cillian my life.

ARES IS on the balcony when I get back to the penthouse, reading. I watch from inside for a moment, grinning when I realize what book he’s utterly engrossed in.

“Busted.”

He frowns, whipping his head around as I step out. I smirk as I nod my chin at the paperback copy of *Fucked Sideways* he quickly tries to hide.

“My, my. Guess there’s two Bastian Pierce fans in the house now.”

He rolls his eyes.

“Morbid curiosity. I might just watch the Netflix series instead.”

I make a face. “Oh God, please don’t. It redefines the phrase ‘based on’ in horrific ways.”

He chuckles. Then his brow furrows.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I shrug, looking away. “I was just over at the house with my uncle talking about…”

“Seamus?”

I shiver, nodding.

I feel Ares move behind me, and his hands land gently on my shoulders. My eyes close, and I take a shaky breath.

“I need to tell you something.”

I twist, turning to look at him.

“Does it pertain to why exactly that fucking animal called you out specifically on national TV?”

“Yes,” I murmur. “It does.”

“Want a drink?”

I shake my head, moving away to sit on the bench running along the railing of the patio.

“Neve, you don’t need to tell me anything you don’t—”

“I’m the one that put him in prison.”

I’m looking out over the Hudson, but I feel Ares go quiet and still behind me.

“*No, Neve,*” he finally growls quietly. “No. That psychopath put *himself* where he is. He’s a fucking monster. He’s exactly where he belongs.”

I shake my head, hugging myself as it all starts to bubble up inside of me, like a black tidal wave. I have to do this.

I *want* to do this.

“When my father made that deal with the FBI that my uncle mentioned the other day… When they sold him to the FBI in exchange for a blind eye towards Kildare business…”

I shiver.

“Neve—”

“Seamus found out. It was supposed to be a sealed agreement, but someone, somehow, leaked it to him. That was right before he broke out of the first place they’d stuck him. They caught him hours later and threw him into a supermax facility. But then he broke out of that one, too.”

And they didn’t catch him right away that time.

The black wave begins to crash over me. I squeeze my eyes shut, shivering as the terror I’ve pushed down for so many years starts to crack open the walls I’ve built around it.

“I was nine. Our nanny at the time had taken Eilish and me to a park near the house. We had security with us, but it wasn’t enough.”

I turn to see Ares looking at me with a cold, stricken, vengeful look on his face.

“Eilish was on the swings, and I was playing on the slide when Seamus came. He killed five guards, incapacitated two more, and…” my eyes drop. “And he took me.”

“*Jesus*,” Ares growls quietly.

Time to go, little bird…

“I don’t remember most of it…I guess I’ve blocked it out. But I was gone for two days. My dad…he always kind of saw himself as being ‘above’ the mob world and was always trying to get respected by the ‘normal’ rich people he rubbed elbows with. So he was trying to have me found through all the legal channels, with no success. But then my uncle flew in. And Cillian is, well, Cillian.”

My face darkens as I raise my eyes to Ares.

“Cillian tracked down anyone who’d ever been remotely associated with Seamus, and then tortured his way through them until he figured out where I was.”

Ares sinks to his knees in front of me, his eyes unblinking and fierce as they hold mine.

“I was out in western Pennsylvania. Seamus had an old hideout there—this hunting shack in the woods. That’s where he brought me.”

Tears prick at my eyes, but I angrily wipe them away.

“That whole crazy shit Cillian was saying about Seamus’ methods? How he’d ‘bleed the innocent’?”

“*Motherfucker*…” Ares snarls quietly.

“*That part* I do remember,” I choke.

I have gaps from the abduction itself, and the part where he drove me bound and gagged in the back of his van all the way to his hunting cabin. But the part where he tied me up…

“He tied me to a fucking *cross*,” I spit. “And he used a red sharpie to mark here, and here…”

Numbly, I touch first one wrist, then the other.

“And here…”

I drag a finger straight down my jugular vein.

“*Neve*…”

Ares’ hands take mine. I shiver, but cling to him tightly as my eyes drop.

“That’s how Cillian found me. Seamus was out getting fuck knows what, and my uncle came crashing through the door. He cut me down and called in the cavalry to wait for Seamus to get back. Except the deal with the FBI was too big to turn down. And their deal was specifically for Seamus *alive*. So my father allowed that to happen. Instead of sending in Kildare men to put Seamus down like the animal he was, the FBI showed up and grabbed him when he came back to the hunting shack to finish what he’d started.”

Ares growls quietly, shaking his head as his hands tighten on mine.

“You didn’t put him in prison, Neve,” he hisses. “You were a fucking *kid* __”

“I testified against him.”

The words choke out of me.

“At his closed-session trial. They had a lot on him. But it was all circumstantial, and much of it was hearsay. There were *so many* people who

knew about his crimes, but they were all so terrified of him that nobody would actually talk. It got to a point where there was a possibility that all the murder charges might be dropped and he would just do time for kidnapping. In which case, he could have been out on good behavior in five years or less."

"I should never have asked you to do what I did, Neve."

I shiver as my eyes raise to Ares'.

"Cillian told me bluntly what was going on. My parents were furious, because of course they were trying to keep it all from me as much as they could. But…he was right. Cillian, I mean. He told me in no uncertain terms that Seamus would go free unless they could pin all those deaths on him. So…"

I swallow, taking a shaky breath as my gaze pierces my husband's.

"So I lied. I got on that witness stand, and I *lied*. I told them all that Seamus had bragged to me about his killings while he had me captive. Cillian had rehearsed me on a lot of the case details, and I regurgitated it all on the witness stand."

Ares' face darkens with rage.

"*Motherfucker*," he rasps. "You were a *kid*, Neve," he snaps. "Your uncle had *no fucking right* to put you in that—"

"I'd do it again," I hiss, my voice cold. "I'd do it again, and again, and again. Ask me a million times, and I'd do the exact same thing every time." My lips draw to a line. "I don't feel bad about lying. Not about that. My lies put a monster in the hole he belongs in."

The only problem is, he knows it.

“And *that’s* why he mentioned me specifically. Because he knows what I did. He knows he’d have walked if it hadn’t been for me.”

I gasp as Ares suddenly pulls me into him, engulfing me in his powerful arms. I tense for a moment. But then, slowly, I realize how hard I’ve been holding back the shivers and the tears. And it’s not until I’m wrapped in his embrace that I realize I can let go.

That I’m safe with him.

That I don’t have to hide any of my demons and my darkness from him.

The hot tears come thick and fast as I press my face to his chest. Ares just keeps me like that, stroking my hair as he holds me tight.

“I will never let anything happen to you,” he growls quietly into my ear. “*Ever*.”

I shudder into him, sniffling back tears.

“This is more than you and your family signed up for, Ares. This was all a business move, and the smartest play now is for your family to sever ties with mine, and sever them quickly before there’s any fallout that lands on __”

“You’re my *wife*.”

I stiffen, shivering as I pull away from his chest. My eyes raise to his, my brow furrowing at the intense, fierce look in his eyes.

“What?”

“I won’t ever let anything happen to you, Neve,” he murmurs, his hand rising to cup my face. “Because you’re my fucking *wife*. Not for business. And not just temporarily.”

I tremble as he pulls me close.

“For life.”

I gasp as his lips slam fiercely and brutally to mine, melting me and sucking the air from my lungs.

“And nothing is ever going to change that.”

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ARES

“HAVE YOU COMPLETELY LOST YOUR MIND?!”

Callie gives me a “you’re in for it now” look as I turn to see Dimitra at the doorway.

“Ya-ya—”

“Don’t you ‘Ya-ya’ me,” she snaps, marching across the living room to where I’ve been playing chess with my sister.

I flash a surprised look at my grandmother. She glares back.

“Well?”

“Ya-ya, I’m not sure what I’m supposed to say because I’m not sure what we’re talking—”

“You *do* know I sit on the board of directors for the SoHo Planning and Development Association, don’t you?”

I do. Just as I know she sits on about a dozen other planning, zoning, city improvement, and charity boards. One, she enjoys it as an excuse to get out. Two, she genuinely is interested in helping to build a better New York,

especially for immigrants. And not least three, her influence on these boards makes the Drakos family *a lot* of money.

“Yes, I’m sure you do.” She smiles grimly. “Well, did you know who *else* is on that same board of directors, with whom I was cultivating a *very* lucrative deal for Drakos-owned construction companies to handle the redevelopment of the Canal Street towers?”

“No, Ya-ya, I don’t. So why don’t you tell—”

“Councilman. Greg. Leery.”

The smile drops from my face. Dimitra glares at me even harder.

“Well?!”

I try to look innocent as I stand. “Well, what?”

“Don’t you dare give me the ‘who, me’ routine.”

“Who the heck is Greg Leery?” Callie mumbles behind me.

“Nobody.”

“A city official your dear brother put in the hospital!” Dimitra spits at the same time as me.

Callie makes a face. “You put a city councilman in the hospital?”

I roll my eyes. “I didn’t put him in the hospital. I broke his nose at best. But I damn well *will* put him in hospital, now that he’s decided to go mouthing off about it.”

“Oh, he’s there, all right,” Dimitra snaps. “Broken nose, crooked septum, and a half-ruptured sinus.”

I resist the urge to mention that at least the councilman who loves to take invasive pictures of passed-out girls still has his testicles attached to his body.

“And he didn’t mouth off at all. Literally. I went to see him when I heard he’d been in an accident, and the man just about had a heart attack when I walked in. He literally would not open his mouth to speak, no matter what I asked.”

I bite back a grim smile.

“I’m not stupid, Ares,” she mutters. “I can add one and one and get two. So, I ask again,” my grandmother says, fixing me with a beady stare. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

There’s a pause. “Nothing,” I finally growl. “I have nothing to say for myself, and that includes an apology. Sorry, not sorry.”

“*Ares*!” she groans. “You are the head of this family now! You can’t be seen walking into city officials’ offices and punching them in the face!”

“I’m not planning on making it a regular occurrence,” I snap back. “It was one-off personal business that had to do with Neve—”

“I don’t care if it had to do with *me*! Ares, you *cannot* be conducting yourself this way! You are the king now! And this family is descended from Spartans!”

I sigh. “Ya-ya—”

“Drakos is *dragon*, in case you’ve forgotten your native tongue.”

“I haven’t—”

“We are the House of the Dragon, Ares, and you can’t—”

Callie snickers behind me. I start to grin too, in spite of myself.

Dimitra glares at the both of us.

“Exactly what is so amusing, may I ask?”

Callie giggles. “Nothing, Ya-ya. It’s just there’s this TV show—”

“I don’t watch TV.”

“Which is fine, but when you say *House of the Dragon*, that’s what people are going to think—”

Dimitra silences her with a look before turning back to me.

“You are king, Ares. And now that you wear that crown, you need to rise above petty personal issues.”

My temper flares. My lips curl.

“Ya-ya—”

“Now, I’m sorry to hear about whatever squabble Neve has with that man. But he’s an important business associate—”

“*And she is my WIFE*!” I roar.

The room goes silent and still.

“She’s my *wife*,” I continue. “And crown or not, kingdom or not, I will *always* put her, her safety, and her well-being first. *Always*. And if you have a problem with that…” My lips thin. “Then too goddamn bad. Because I’m the head of this family, Ya-ya. Not you.”

You could have heard a pin drop. Dimitra holds my fierce gaze, glaring right back at me as the seconds tick by.

And then slowly, her lips curl into a grin.

Wait, what?

She beams, moving towards me and suddenly hugs me. Then she pulls back, reaches up, and pats my cheek.

“Good boy. I was wondering when you’d stop lying to yourself.”

She winks, turns, and heads for the door.

“Oh, but Ares?” She turns back, her brow furrowing. “You’ll want to settle things with Ezio Adamos sooner rather than later. He was supposed to sign contracts today with Councilman Leery for that multi-use development in the Seaport. He’s been banking fairly hard on that, I think.” She smiles. “Well, I’ll see you both at dinner.”

The door shuts behind her.

“Duuuude…”

I turn to see my sister grinning at me as she taps her temple.

“You just got Ya-ya-ed *so* fucking hard.”

I SQUEEZE in a quick video call with Deimos before dinner. It’s getting late in London, but my brother’s always been a bit of a night owl.

He’s also the most effective second-in-command I could have asked for, despite being the third-youngest brother after Hades and Kratos. But Hades is, well, *Hades*. And Kratos has no interest or patience for leadership. Deimos was born with a gift for maintaining order.

Though, truth be told, I’m guessing at least half of the reason things are going so swimmingly back on the other side of the pond is because my

brother has a way of scaring the absolute shit out of people.

It's been suggested that he maybe lives a bit too much up to his namesake of the god of dread and terror. I'd be inclined to agree.

After the call, I head out to the gardens, where Dimitra's decided we're eating alfresco tonight. Neve, her sister, her uncle, Castle, Owen Foley, and few others from our side are there already. This joint family dinner is something Dimitra has decided is going to be a regular Sunday thing as a means of bringing everyone together. My eyes scan the small crowd. My pulse thuds quicker, and there's no hiding the grin on my face as I eagerly look for Neve.

"I've fucking *tried* with you!"

I frown, turning sharply when I hear Ezio's voice on the other side of one of the hedges.

"But this!? This is too far!"

"You need to lower your voice when you speak to me, Mr. Adamos."

I grin at the authoritative note in my wife's voice.

"Oh, do I, now?!" Ezio fires back.

"You do," Neve says. "In fact, it might be best if you just kept your mouth shut entirely."

I grin even more widely.

Ezio laughs coldly. "I find that amusing, coming from you."

"Really? Why's that?"

"Because from what I understand, the only reason your husband went full caveman on Leery is because *you* couldn't seem to keep your mouth shut

for the councilman five years ago. Him *or* his friend."

My face twists into a mask of rage as I storm around the hedge.

"Mr. Adamos—"

Ezio doesn't see me coming as he spits at Neve's feet.

"No. I'll speak to you like the cunt you are—"

Ezio screams as I grab him by the ankles, lift him up over the edge of the building, and let him fucking *dangle there*, upside-down, forty stories above Central Park South.

"*Give me one fucking reason*," I snarl. "ONE fucking reason not to let go!"

"Ares!" Ezio shrieks, his eyes wide as he stares up at me in sheer terror. "Please! *Please*! Have mercy! Think of our history!"

I can smell the alcohol on him from here. But I don't care if he's drunk. I don't give a shit if he's still grieving and angry about his son.

I *very* much give a shit about the way he's just spoken to Neve.

"Ares!!" he wails. "*Please*!!"

"Ares!" Kratos is shaking me, trying to drag my arms back, to pull Ezio back over the edge. But for all his strength, I'm immovable as a cliff as I glare death at the man whose life is literally in my hands.

"Ares!" Kratos roars at me. "Think this fucking through! It's rush-hour traffic down there! You gonna drop him in front of three thousand witnesses?!"

Please. With the fury roaring inside of me right now, I'll do it in front of a *million* witnesses.

“*Ares*.”

Through the red miasma swirling in my vision, I blink back to reality and turn at the soft sound of her voice. My eyes clear as they lock with Neve’s.

“*Don’t do this*,” she says gently, laying a hand on my clenched arm. “Not for me. Please.”

The murderous red mist clears. I blink, and then turn to glare at Ezio. Snarling, I yank him back up and shove him onto the ground at my feet. He sobs, obviously as drunk as he is relieved to be given a second lease on life.

“*Thank you*!” He weeps, clutching my leg. “Thank you, Ares—”

“Go. You’re done.”

He blinks up at me.

“From this moment on, until further notice, which I can promise you is not ever coming, the Adamos family is hereby banned and barred from all Drakos business.”

Whatever color is left in Ezio’s face drains completely.

Yeah, drunk as he may be, he understands the gravity of what I’ve just said. I’m not sentencing him to death, though I should. And I’m not declaring war on the Adamos family. But excommunication is not something anyone in our world handles lightly. From now on, the Adamos family is effectively a vassal state. They’ll pay their dues to the Drakos family, but they won’t be involved in any decision-making, councils, or any of that.

It’s basically the lowest rung on the ladder before your allegiance gets severed and your families become enemies.

Get fucked and die, Ezio.

He doesn’t even fight it. Half because he’s probably still shitting his pants from being dangled over the street. And half because he understands, even scared, drunk, and emotionally wrecked, how very fine the thread is that he’s hanging by right now.

“If you ever speak to my wife like that again, there isn’t a power on earth or in heaven that’ll stop me from making sure you kiss that sidewalk next time. Do I make myself abundantly clear?”

Ezio breaks down completely, sobbing and babbling as he nods and apologizes over and over. I turn to Kratos.

“Get this shit-stain the fuck out of here.”

He nods as he grabs the groveling, sniveling man up and hauls him off.

“Oh, and Kratos?”

He glances at me. I turn to level my eyes with Neve’s.

Her face is flushed. Her eyes are wild and fierce. And fire from the gods themselves crackles between us.

“Please tell Ya-ya that unfortunately, we won’t be able to stay for dinner tonight.”

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NEVE

THERE'S a feeling right before lightning strikes. The atmosphere gets thicker and feels charged. The hairs on the back of your neck stand up, and you can almost taste the energy in the air.

That's the feeling roaring through my veins and racing over my electrified skin as Ares and I take the elevator down from the rooftop Drakos estate. We're standing still, looking straight ahead as the floors ding past. We're not even touching, but it's there, like a storm about to blow in over a windy field. Like a tsunami about to crash over the rocky shore.

At one point, the side of his hand brushes mine.

I almost moan, just from the tiny touch. *That's* how charged everything is. And if he actually were to grab my hand right now, or, God help me, kiss me?

I'd rip his pants off, impale myself on his cock, and I'd be coming before we even hit the lobby.

But he doesn't touch me, much less do anything else. Probably because he knows better. Five seconds after the hand brush, the doors slide open and we step into the lobby.

I *do* actually moan under my breath when his hand seizes mine. When he yanks me through the lobby, out to the street, and into the back of the waiting town car. The driver's still closing the passenger door when Ares reaches over and jams his finger against the button that shuts the privacy screen between the driver and us.

Time stands still as I watch the fucking thing rise up, tortuously slowly. Every nerve in my body is keyed up. Every neuron in my brain is screaming to be touched. To be taken. To be *fucked*.

The partition clicks softly as it locks. And suddenly, everything returns to full speed. In one motion, before I can say or do a thing, Ares spins to me, grabs my face, and slams his mouth to mine. I moan, shaking and quivering as he growls into my lips, devouring them. He shoves me down across the seat, and I'm still fumbling with the zipper at the back of my dress when he drops to the floor, shoves the dress up to my waist, and shoves his fingers into my panties.

"*Ares…*"

He yanks the slick lace down my legs, tossing it away with a frustrated snarl before he shoves my knees back and apart. I whimper, shuddering, as I feel his teeth graze up my inner thigh. He gives my flesh a nipping bite, making me yelp and moan at the same time. Just as the sting of his teeth is fully registering in my mind, his mouth delves between my legs.

His tongue drags up my lips, and I cry out as pleasure explodes through my core.

"*Oh fuck…Ares…*"

He growls into me, his tongue snaking inside as I whine in pleasure. My eyes roll back at how deep his tongue is: it's like he's fucking me with it as

my body twists and begs for more. Then his tongue drags up to my clit, and I moan when his lips wrap around the aching bud.

He devours me mercilessly, swirling his tongue over my throbbing button. I moan wildly, my hips bucking and gyrating under him, greedily pushing against his mouth for more. He growls, shoving my knees back further. And suddenly, I yelp as his palm smacks hard against my ass.

Whimpers and cries for more tumble unbidden from my lips as he drags his tongue up and down my pussy lips and swirls it around my clit as he spanks one cheek, then the other. The sharp, bright sting of his palm mixed with the heady, sultry pleasure of his lips wrapping around my clit have me drowning in ecstasy as I moan helplessly under his touch.

Ares drags two fingers over my slippery lips before slowly sinking them into me as far as they will go. I gasp, eyes rolling back in pleasure.

“I can feel this greedy little pussy squeezing my fingers so fucking tight,” he rasps against my thigh, nipping at my skin again and making me gasp.

My eyes bulge as I feel a third finger easing into me, making my body shudder in pleasure.

“*That’s it, squeeze*,” he groans as he curls all three of them into me. “And think how fucking full you’ll feel when it’s my cock making this little pussy drip all over the seats.”

His fingers thrust in and out of me, filling me to what feels like my limit. That is, until I think about what he said.

He’s right. His cock is much, *much* bigger, and the thought of him sinking *that* into me right now has me clawing at the seat beneath me.

His mouth drags over my clit, his tongue swirling around it as he fucks me with his fingers. The wave grows hotter and larger, and when he spanks my

ass again as he swirls his tongue over my clit, I break.

I scream into the crook of my arm as the orgasm explodes through me. My hips rise and grind against his mouth and his fingers in spasming waves, my entire body twisting and then crumpling into the seat.

I haven't even had time to breathe before he flips me around, bends me over the seat, and moves in behind me. I moan desperately as he yanks down the top of my dress, freeing my breasts before he shoves the hem up to my waist. I hear the furious jangle of his belt and zipper. Then suddenly, I'm whimpering as I feel the hot, thick, swollen head of his cock notch between my lips.

His hand grabs a fistful of my hair, twisting it against my scalp as he leans over me to bring his lips against my ear.

"*Now, fuck that cock like you fucking mean it.*"

My eyes roll back, my breath chokes. And then, I'm rocking my hips back and feeling my drenched pussy swallow every single inch of him.

The cry tumbles from my lips, and there's nothing I can do to stop or quiet it. Ares groans, grinding deep into me before his hand tightens again in my hair. He tugs my head up, arching my back as slides out only to ram back into me.

My whines and moans of pleasure fill the back seat of the town car as we both start to move together, me driving my ass back onto his beautiful cock, and Ares hissing in pleasure as he fucks into me hard, over and over. His other hand moves up, and when I feel his fingers at my lips, I eagerly open my mouth to suck them greedily inside.

Instantly, I realize they're same fingers he was fucking me with. And it's so fucking dirty and hot to taste myself on them that I almost come right there.

I moan, humming around and sucking furiously on his fingers as his swollen dick plunges into me over and over. The lurid, wet sounds of my pussy getting rammed with his cock, and the filthy sounds of his abs slapping my ass, fill the back seat.

His hand leaves my mouth, grabbing both of my wrists and forcing my cheek to the seat. I whimper as Ares pulls my arms behind my back, pinning my wrists with one hand at the small of my back while still keeping his grip on my hair.

The positions is totally dominant, controlling, and possessive.

And *so fucking good*.

The pleasure chokes from my mouth against the seat cushion. I feel utterly and completely owned. And it's that absolute lack of control that has my body contorting, rippling, writhing, and shuddering towards an explosive release.

"Your sweet little pussy is milking my big fat dick so fucking hard, Neve," Ares groans. "Trying to squeeze every drop of cum from my balls like a greedy little girl."

I turn my head to scream my pleasure into the seat, my back arching as the bomb begins to shake and rumble deep inside of me, ready to go off.

"Is that what you want, greedy girl? You want my cock to fill your little pussy with cum? You want gallons of it dripping down your fucking thighs so that you don't forget *whose you are*?"

The ecstasy thunders through me and my vision goes white as my face caves under the weight of the pleasure he's wringing mercilessly from my body.

Ares pounds into me, his hands twisting in my hair and pinning my arms behind my back as I go rigid. My toes curl. I'm right on the edge.

"*Come for me, Neve. Show me how a good slut comes for her husband's fat fucking cock."*

Holy. Fucking. *God*.

My world explodes as I tip over the precipice. The orgasm wrenches through my core, twisting and contorting my muscles as I spasm and scream into the seat. Ares groans, driving deep as his cock swells even harder and bigger, before suddenly, he's coming with me. The feel of his hot cum spilling into me in thick ropes has me shuddering as another climax rips through me, until suddenly, I go limp, spent.

And it all goes dark.

"NEVE."

"*Neve*."

"*NEVE!*"

I gasp, jolting as his hand cups my face. I blink, my brows furrowing as I look around. We're still in the car. But I'm not bent over the seat anymore. I'm curled up in a huddled ball in his lap, with his jacket around me.

I raise my eyes, blushing when I see Ares' concerned faced peering into mine.

"Hi," I blurt, giggling like I'm drunk.

His brows unknit, and one arches.

“You just scared the fuck out of me, Neve. I thought you were having a seizure.”

“*Nope*,” I drawl lazily.

I feel completely free. Utterly unbound. Sinfully relaxed. And I’m fairly sure I just had the biggest, most explosive orgasm of my life.

I’m *also* fairly sure I temporarily blacked out from coming so hard.

“Not a seizure,” I giggle like I’m high, biting my lip as I reach up to press a finger to his lips. “But…I…that…” I grin a lopsided grin at him. “*Wow*.”

Ares’ lips curl into the smuggest look I’ve ever seen on anyone.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” I giggle.

“Too late.”

He leans down, and I moan softly, cupping his face as he kisses me deeply. My tongue dances with his, my body shuddering and aching to be even closer to him. Then suddenly I realize something.

The car’s not moving.

Frowning, I pull away and glance through the tinted windows.

We’re parked in front of our building. I blush fiercely as my eyes snap to his.

“Exactly how long have we been here?”

“Not long.” He smirks at me. “Just since I fucked you so hard you passed out.”

I roll my eyes, blushing deeply.

“We should probably get inside.”

“I agree,” he growls, leaning down to brush his lips to mine. “But not because I’m in any hurry to leave this car.”

I grin. “Why, then?”

“Because I’m going to fuck you again, and when I do, I want you flat on your back, in our bed, with your legs over my shoulders.”

Oh.

Heat floods my core as I kiss him slowly. When I pull back, we both dress quickly before slipping out of the car and running, laughing, into the building. I gasp when Ares slams me against the wall of the elevator, kissing me deeply as it begins to ascend.

I whimper when his hand snakes under my dress and into my panties.

“I can feel my cum dripping out of your pussy,” he murmurs into my ear.

I moan, clutching at him as he starts to finger me again, rubbing my clit with his thumb.

“I’m going to enjoy using my cock to push it all back inside.”

I grab him and kiss him heatedly. The elevator dings open, and we stumble into the penthouse. But then, the elevator dings again. And again. And again.

“Wait. That’s my phone,” he growls.

Something pings again.

“And that’s mine.”

We pull apart, him digging his phone out of his pants pocket, me pulling mine from my clutch. Apparently, having mind-blowing sex in the backseat has a way of tuning out everything.

My eyes bulge.

Fuck, my phone is exploding with notifications—from Eilish, from Cillian, from Castle.

“Neve.”

“Holy shit,” I frown. “What’s with all the texts—”

“*Neve*.”

“And emails—”

“NEVE.”

The coldness in his voice startles me, pulling my attention up. Instantly, my skin prickles when I see the harsh, fierce look on his face.

“What’s going—”

“Seamus O’Conor just broke out of Florence Prison.”

And the world blurs around me.

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NEVE

THREE WEEKS.

We spend *three weeks* under complete lockdown. All the Kildares, obviously, but the Drakos family too. Ares and I hole up in the penthouse. Food and whatever else we need is brought to us. The guard presence in the lobby, around every entrance, and patrolling the building on random floors triples.

It becomes a problem with several other of the extremely affluent residents in other units, to the point that there's a meeting to discuss the "criminal presence and persistent threat of danger on the property".

In the end, Ares settles that particular problem by literally *buying up* the condos of the residents who make a stink about it.

The real downside—and it's a big one—is that it sucks being away from everyone for so long. I can't visit Eilish, and she can't visit me. It's the same with Callie, and she's become super close with Eilish and I.

But I know this is the way it has to be, until the Executioner is recaptured.

Two weeks ago, I made a conscious decision to stop watching or reading the news. It became too much: almost every story was either about Seamus'

history of violence, or his time inside jail where he was just as violent, or his threats to me on live television. If not that, it was various “experts”, usually ex-law enforcement people, speculating on where he might be.

Or worse and even more disturbingly, on how long it might be before he tries to make good on the threat he made on TV.

Mercifully, the press doesn’t know for sure why he wants me dead. They don’t know about the deal my father made with the FBI. Or about my abduction when I was nine. Or about my testimony being the final nail in Seamus’ coffin.

All of that was sealed fifteen years ago.

So most news outlets have come to the conclusion that Seamus is just insane and irrational. But still, avoiding the news is important for the sake of my mental and emotional state.

There is, in fact, one upside to this whole situation: *I’ve spent three weeks utterly locked up with my husband, the god of war*.

Who also happens to be the god of sex, playing my body like a violin virtuoso and making me come harder and more explosively than I was actually aware the human body was physically capable of.

So, uh, yeah. That part’s good.

That part’s *really* good.

“*Spread your legs*.”

Did I mention how fucking good this part is?

I’m lying in the middle of our bed, blindfolded, naked, heat rushing through my face at how extra exposed I feel because of the pillow under my ass, raising my hips up.

And now he wants me to spread my legs? *Hot. As. Sin.*

When I hesitate, I suddenly gasp as I feel his hand lightly swat at my inner thigh. Not a hard smack, but with just enough force to make me shiver and whimper.

So I do as he says.

I feel Ares move down one leg, teasing his fingertips over my skin until his big hand wraps around one of my ankles. He loops something silky around it, and I shiver as I feel him pull it tight.

“Ares—”

“Shh.”

I throb with heat as he moves up that same leg. And just as his fingertips are millimeters from touching me where I desperately need him to touch me, they move to the other leg instead. I groan in frustration, my hips squirming as he teases down to the other ankle. When he loops more silk around that one and pulls tight, suddenly, I stiffen.

“Hang on, what are you—*Ares*…”

I whimper as I feel his weight shift on the bed, and his fingertips drag up my ribs to tease over a breast. He dances his touch over my nipple, swirling a finger around the achingly hard, pale pink nipple.

My back arches in pleasure as a drawn-out sigh falls from my lips. Just as it does, his touch leaves my breast. He trails his hands down to a wrist, and I shudder as he roughly pushes it up above my head and loops a third silk around it.

Heat throbs in my core. He’s tying me up.

For one microsecond, I almost scream. There's a momentary flash of pure panic as my body tenses and my mind replays nightmares from my past.

Of someone else tying me up, but not to tease me. Not to give me pleasure like Ares is doing.

To cut me. To make me bleed.

To kill me.

"Bad."

My brow knits as my body tenses.

"Wh—what?"

"*Bad*." He growls the word low into my ear as his touch trails to my other wrist. "That's your safe word. I know what you're thinking right now, Neve," he murmurs quietly. "I know where your mind is going. But you *know* who I am. You know where you are. And you know this is not then and I am not him."

I swallow, allowing my heart to stop racing. I nod quietly.

"I'm not doing this to send you back to that place, Neve. I'm doing this to free you from it."

The fourth piece of silk slips over my wrist, pulls tight. And for the second time in my life I'm totally helpless, tied up, and at the mercy of a man.

But just as I think that, and anticipating that the terror will come rushing back…it doesn't. Because he's right: this is not that time or place. And he is not the monster from my childhood.

I'm in a place that's come to feel like home, not a shack. The bonds are sensual silk, not harsh rope. The touch against my skin is a lover's gentle

caress, not a monster’s honed blade.

And even though I feel like this *should* terrify me, it doesn’t.

No, it’s not fear roaring through my veins right now.

It’s pure, unbridled lust.

I shiver as he teases his fingers over my skin, making me whimper when he touches a nipple again.

“If this becomes too much—”

“It’s not,” I gasp as his hand traces lightly over my stomach, pushing lower. “More.”

“If it *does*, though. Just say the word. Say *bad*, and this ends. The knots get cut, the blindfold comes off, and I stop touching you.”

“I don’t ever want you to do that,” I murmur quietly.

“Do what?”

“Stop touching me.”

I jolt, whimpering as I suddenly feel his lips against my ear.

“*Good*. Because I’m going to have a hard time ever keeping my hands off you.”

I moan when his hand slips down to cup my pussy. One finger drags lazily up through my dewy wet lips, rolling over my clit as I gasp in pleasure.

The weight on the bed shifts again and I shudder heatedly when I feel his hands skim up my thighs, followed by his breath.

“*Ares*…”

His mouth hums against my pussy, his tongue lapping against me. I cry out, hips rising against his mouth as the pleasure shudders through me. His tongue swirls in slow, agonizing circles around my clit, until my body is shamelessly, violently bucking against his mouth.

He keeps the tease going, a warm, slow wave washing over me. Then he drags his tongue lower, spreading my lips with his fingers before plunging his tongue into me. I groan in pleasure, eyes rolling back beneath the blindfold.

"*Yes*…"

He growls, the rumbling sensation vibrating through me as his tongue drags up through my folds. Ares takes my clit between his lips, swirling the tip of his tongue around the aching bud until I'm begging him—loudly—to make me come.

To which, he only chuckles darkly.

"Oh, you'll have to beg harder than that, my wife."

His tongue plunges into me again, making me squeal as I strain against my bonds. He licks up to my clit again, cranking the pleasure higher until I'm sure I'm going to come then and there. Which is, of course, precisely when he backs off, leaving me a shaking, whimpering, whining mess.

"*Please!*" I moan.

His teeth nip my inner thigh, and I cry out. His thumb rolls over my clit as his tongue slowly fucks in and out of me. Then it moves lower. My eyes bulge behind the blindfold, my mouth going slack.

"Where are you…*ohmyfuckinggod*…"

His tongue touches my asshole, and fireworks explode in my head. The tip swirls slowly around my ring, sending pure fire and lightning through every nerve in my body. An inhuman whine of pleasure melts from my mouth, my body going stiff and then utterly slack as he tongues my most private place.

"*Holy fuck..Ares…*"

"You like my tongue there, don't you? Such a dirty girl."

I whimper, nodding as I melt into bliss. His thumb rolls slow, deliberate circles around my throbbing clit as his tongue traces the same pattern against my ass. He grips my cheeks tightly, spreading me farther open and giving his tongue deeper access. I whine in pleasure, my hips bucking as much as they can against his mouth.

"*Good girl*."

I almost come the second he says it. There's something so unbelievably wrong—almost blasphemous—about him calling me a good girl while he's doing something so wicked and bad to my body.

"Does my good girl want to come?" Ares growls.

I whine in pleasure, nodding vigorously. My hips are moving on their own, rolling and arching against his tongue. The pad of his thumb rubs circles over my clit, and I moan as he sinks two fingers into my pussy.

"*Please*!" I gasp breathlessly, lost and drowning in a haze of pleasure.

Ares suddenly pulls away, making me whimper in protest before I feel his weight shift. I shiver as I feel him move, as if he's kneeling…by my head? Behind my head? On either side of…?

"Then you'd better open your mouth like a good girl."

That’s when I feel the thick, swollen head of his cock slide wetly across my lips, and I realize he’s kneeling astride my face. Eagerly—wantonly—I open my mouth and wrap my lips around his cock.

Ares hisses in pleasure.

“*Fuck yes*, just like that,” he groans. “Such a good girl. *Such* a pretty little cock-sucker.”

It occurs to me instantly that if it was literally *any* other man in the world calling me that, I’d bite down. Hard. Then I’d use my safe word, tell him to go fuck himself with a claw hammer, and *leave*.

But with Ares, it’s like pouring gasoline on a fire. Because with him, it’s different. When he calls me a good girl, praises me like that, it makes me want to melt. Or explode in pure ecstasy. And I realize now that when he pushes things into a darker, dirtier direction, it’s got just as much power over me.

Maybe even more. Just now, with those words, without even touching me it was like he’d just run his tongue over my clit. I moan deeply as the realization hits me. I whimper, sucking on the thick, swollen head of his cock stuffed between my lips and swirling my tongue around it. And it swells even bigger, and when he groans, it’s the same sensation as his praise with words.

“*Say it again,*” I whimper quietly as I momentarily slip my mouth from him.

He chuckles darkly, sending shivers through my body. I feel him touch me—feel his fingers dragging up through my slick lips to roll my clit.

“Is that what has your pussy so sopping wet and messy for me?” Ares growls. “Being told what a pretty little cock-sucker you are while my big

fat dick is stretching those gorgeous lips wide apart?”

I spasm, nearly coming as he rubs my clit in slow circles. Ares chuckles darkly again.

“Open your mouth, beautiful,” he rasps. “Open that mouth and show me what a good little slut you can be for my cock while I make your pretty little pussy come for me.”

He shifts again, and I cry out when his mouth covers my pussy. His tongue swirls around my clit as he sucks it between his lips, his fingers curling into me. His thumb traces circles around my ass as he lowers his hips, pushing his cock between my eager lips.

I moan, sucking and slurping wetly on his swollen head. My tongue drags and dances around the crown, relishing the way it becomes even bigger and harder in my mouth. I can taste the sweetness of his precum as he growls, shallowly fucking my mouth as he devours my pussy. My world begins to blur, my body melting into liquid fire until I can’t even think anymore. All I can do is hum and moan wildly around his cock, tonguing the bulbous head eagerly as his mouth and fingers shove me over the edge.

The sob of pleasure wrenches through my body, shattering through every nerve ending and turning me to fire. I scream a muffled cry of pleasure around him as the orgasm explodes through my core. My hips rise, pushing eagerly and desperately to his mouth as his tongue and his fingers turn my world upside down.

Ares hisses, and I whimper as he pushes his cock deep into the back of my throat. He roars, his hand shoving down to grab a fistful of my hair just as he starts to come. The thrill of his strength, of being under his control, and of his power over me in this moment is like napalm. And as I feel his cock throb between my lips, I start to explode again. His cum spills over my

tongue, and I’m eagerly swallowing every last drop as my lips stretch around him and my own orgasm rolls into another, until my world blurs at the edges.

After that, I go limp. I can’t even think straight as I collapse into the sheets in a state of bliss and an orgasmic haze. I’m dimly aware of Ares undoing the silk ties at my wrists and ankles. Of slipping the pillow out from under me before gathering me up into his arms.

When I finally open my eyes, I see him hovering above me, his gaze stabbing into mine. We don’t say a word. Not because we don’t know what to say, but because we don’t have to. Everything that needs saying is written right there on both of our faces.

It scares the hell out of me.

It also makes me want to scream in pure joy.

And it makes me want to stay in this moment forever, wrapped in his arms and lost in his fierce gaze.

His hand cups my cheek as he leans down. I blush, shying away.

“I should brush my teeth—”

“Do you think I give a fuck about that?”

Our mouths crush together, his tongue instantly pushing between my lips to swirl with mine. I moan desperately, kissing him back and tasting myself on his tongue, as he does the same. It’s intensely intimate. And I don’t ever want it to stop.

I don’t *any* of this strange and wonderful reality we’ve built around ourselves to stop.

Ever.

THE NEXT DAY, for the first time in *ages*, we actually have to put on clothes, after one of Ares' captains calls up to let him know we have a visitor.

Cillian.

Five minutes later, dressed in black jeans and a black t-shirt, Ares is opening the door for my uncle. I step into the main living room from the bedroom, trying to hide the flush in my cheeks as I zip up a hoodie. But, I'm sure the second Cillian's eyes land on me, he knows.

There's simply no hiding a flush that's pretty much permanent now.

A second man follows Cillian inside. For a second, I frown, trying to place him. Then it clicks.

"This," Cillian grunts, turning to Ares and then gesturing to the older, handsome man in the suit next to him, "is Shane Dorsey, with the FBI."

Ares lifts a brow. "Exactly what is this about?"

"Surprise. You're under arrest," Cillian smirks sarcastically.

"Hilarious."

Agent Dorsey clears his throat and extends a hand to Ares.

"Shane's a friend of the family," Cillian explains as the two other men shake brusquely.

Agent Dorsey turns to smile at me. "Great to see you again, Neve."

I see the shadow flicker across Ares' face, and the way his jaw grinds dangerously. He loosens slightly as I move next to him and slip my fingers into his.

“Agent Dorsey was my handling agent after…before.”

Cillian nods grimly. “Personally, I’d have rather spent a solid week alone with that motherfucker and had some fun with a filleting knife. But Declan gave Shane here the career bump of a lifetime when he let him bring Seamus into custody. In exchange, Shane, who’s now acting chief of the greater New York area, is the one who turns a blind eye to all Kildare activity here.”

Ares’ eyes narrow.

“You should have fucking killed him when you had the chance.”

Shane lifts a shoulder, a grim look on his face. “No argument here. Cillian’s right. Bringing that shithead in made my career with the Bureau. But in hindsight I’d trade it all to go back in time and put a bullet in that psycho’s head.”

Ares nods in approval at that.

“Anyway, I wanted you both to hear this in person.” Cillian turns and gives the floor to the FBI chief, who clears his throat.

“We haven’t gone public with this yet, but you should both know that the Bureau tracked Seamus O’Conor crossing the border into Mexico yesterday morning.”

I wish the news was—more. I wish it was that he was dead, or tied to the front of a rocket blasting into the sun. But even so, the second I hear it, a certain weight lifts from my shoulders. It’s like my lungs open a little more for the first time since hearing about his escape.

Ares frowns.

“You’re *sure*?”

Shane smiles grimly. “The FBI doesn’t deal in wishful thinking or conjecture, Mr. Drakos. He used false papers, obviously. But we caught him both on camera and via a number of eyewitnesses crossing into Mexico. He went directly to the main branch of Banco Santander in Juarez and left with two suitcases he didn’t walk in with.”

My eyes widen, and my breath comes more quickly. My hand squeezes Ares’.

“There’s a number of accounts we weren’t able to seize from O’Conor when he was arrested. Accounts under different names, different corporate identities. Mexico isn’t the Caymans, but if you pay off the right bank boards or directors, they’ll stonewall even the FBI for a couple of decades at least. One of these accounts was at Banco Santander, to the tune of thirty million US dollars. As of yesterday, that account has been closed.”

“Meaning?” Ares growls thinly.

Agent Dorsey smiles thinly. “Meaning this asshole is *gone*, Mr. Drakos. The Bureau thinks the most likely scenario is that O’Conor is going to head somewhere without a US extradition treaty and live out the rest of his miserable fucking life drunk on a beach.”

Holy shit.

More and more weight lifts from my shoulders. My heart begins to race.

“I thought you just said the Bureau didn’t do lot of wishful thinking or conjecture,” Ares grunts.

Dorsey chuckles. “That’s not wishful thinking, Mr. Drakos. That’s our official theory. Look, the man has zero connections left in the US. They’re all either dead, or want him dead, or would happily sell him out for some of

that sweet sweet Bureau immunity. O'Conor's got thirty mil in cash, nothing for him here—"

"I think he was quite clear on national TV about some unfinished business here," Ares hisses.

Shane nods, turning to give me a quick look.

"Look, I'm not saying you should leave your doors unlocked. And of course I'll keep some of our off-book assets looking out for Neve. But my professional opinion is that the stunt on TV was a deliberate tactic to get put into isolation. Whoever broke him out *used* the fact that he was in solitary to—"

"I'm sorry, *what*?"

Naked fear sinks its claws into my heart. Shane turns to give me a grim look.

"I'm sorry for the blunt news. But yes. He definitely had help. They used a security flaw in the solitary confinement facility within Florence to break him out."

"Who the *fuck* is 'they'?" Ares snarls.

Dorsey sighs. "Thirty million buys a *lot* of friends, Mr. Drakos. We're looking into it. But whoever it is, they won't have any vendetta against Neve. It's more likely a for-hire crew of mercenaries."

"So…" I frown, swallowing thickly. "What now?"

"I'd say stay as safe and secure as makes you comfortable, Neve," Shane grunts. "You have to live your life. The fact is, O'Conor is out of the country with two literal suitcases full of cash, and no logical reason to want to come back. He's also at the top of the United States most wanted list.

Every border agent and law enforcement officer in the country is looking for him. If I were a betting man, my money would be on that asshole sitting on a beach in Vietnam with a fake name in his passport and a cocktail in his hand by tomorrow night."

I blink, my pulse thudding hard.

It's over.

Yes, if Seamus isn't dead he's still out there. But knowing he's already across a border, possibly clear across the other side of the planet, with all that cash, and hearing Shane's theory about Seamus *wanting* to get himself thrown into solitary as part of an escape plan somehow has the weight on my shoulders crumbling away. It's like finally being shown the underside of your bed and seeing that the monster you've been imagining lurking there every night is just an old t-shirt.

Cillian clears his throat. "I'm going to keep a full security detail on you for now, of course. But I'll leave it to you both to decide how you'd like to proceed in terms of lockdown and all that."

Agent Dorsey shakes Ares' hand, and then gives me a comforting yet professional hug while my husband glares death at him. Then Dorsey and my uncle are gone, leaving Ares and me alone.

I'm still standing there silent and numb trying to process it all as Ares comes up behind me and wraps his arms around my waist. I shiver as he lowers his mouth to kiss my neck.

"Whatever you want to do, we'll do," he growls. "If you want to head back out into the world, you can do that—"

I turn to arch a brow at him.

He frowns. “Okay, you can do that *with* an armed shadow escort. Or, we can stay locked in here forever.”

I smirk. “Forever?”

He shrugs. “If you want.”

I smile, twisting in his arms to face him.

“Look, don’t get me wrong. Being locked up in here for weeks on end with you has been…”

“Trying? Illuminating? Disenchanting?”

I giggle. “I was going to say heaven, if exhausting.”

He grins wolfishly.

“*But…*”

“But you’re not a parakeet,” Ares finishes for me quietly. “I know. And you’re not my princess in a gilded cage either, as much as I like the sound of that.”

I grin, shaking my head.

Ares sighs. “Then back to the world at large it is. *With* a shadow guard.” His brow furrows. “Don’t even try to fight me on that one.”

I blush, grinning at him. He grins back.

“So,” Ares grunts. “Where are we going tonight for your first taste of freedom in three weeks? And please don’t even think of suggesting The Banshee.”

I chew on my lip, one hand coming up to lazily trace a finger over his hard chest through his t-shirt. A flush creeps into my face.

“What if we start this whole freedom thing tomorrow?”

His brow arches. “All right. And tonight?”

“*Tonight*…” I blush as I stand up on my tiptoes to bring my lips near his ear. “Tonight, how about you do to me again what you did earlier, and show me exactly how much *your* princess in a gilded cage I am…”

I shiver, whimpering as his hands eagerly slide down to grab my ass possessively, pulling my body tight against his. A low growl rumbles in his chest.

“You want me to blindfold you again?”

I swallow, nodding.

“And tie you up?”

I nod again, whimpering as one of his hands slides up to grab a fistful of my hair at the nape. Ares groans, fire flickering in his eyes as his mouth descends to my neck.

“I hope you’re wearing panties.”

My breath catches.

“*Why—*”

“Because you’re going to need them stuffed into your mouth to stop from waking half the goddamn city before I’m done with you tonight.”

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ARES

AND SO LIFE, as they say in the movies, *goes back to normal*. Mostly, at least. I still have a small army of guards shadowing Neve wherever she goes. But after three weeks locked up together in our penthouse, she starts to go back out into the world.

The emotions that brings up in me when I think about it are conflicted, to say the least.

On the one hand, logically, yes: it's a relief to know the threat against her has effectively gone away. I've had my own people do some poking around, and Agent Dorsey was telling the truth: the US Justice Department has record of Seamus crossing the Mexican border and disappearing into Juarez.

The story with his escape checks out, too. As impenetrable and inescapable as Florence ADX is, Seamus and whoever he hired found one weak point: a flaw in the scheduled timing of guards watching over prisoners in ultra isolation. How they managed to get an explosive device into that isolation cell and blow some holes in a couple walls is still being investigated. But they used a ten-second "blackout" window to get things into place without being seen.

So yes, on one hand, I'm glad there's a degree of safety with Neve being able to go out now. To visit her sister, and Callie. To go back to classes on campus. And most importantly, to live her life with a little less fear.

But on the other hand, *not* having her all to myself in the penthouse for weeks on end—just the two of us shut off from the rest of the world—fucking *sucks*.

There's a chance I've gotten a bit too accustomed to having her effectively imprisoned with me, with nothing to do all day but see how many times I can make her come before she can't walk.

That's just my own selfishness talking, though. Overall, I know it's a good thing that she's going out again.

But that doesn't mean for a second that I've let my guard down. Even if the FBI is sure Seamus is sipping gin and tonics on a beach in southeast Asia somewhere.

I nod as Hades and I step into Cillian's office. Cillian and Owen Foley nod back. Neve—along with her small army of guards—is at class. Eilish and Callie are off running an errand somewhere, with Castle in tow.

Which is exactly why I've chosen *now* for this little meeting. Because Neve's clearly enjoying her new freedom. She's smiling more. She's breathing easier, knowing that monster is gone.

Except I'm not so convinced he is, and neither is Cillian. But neither of us wants to worry her with that. Let her be happy.

Hades and I sit on the couch across from the two Irishmen as Cillian lights a cigarette.

"So?"

Cillian nods as he takes a slow drag.

“The devices were professionally made.”

He’s talking about the three bombs that allowed Seamus to escape solitary at Florence: one that smashed a hole in his cell wall, and two more that were intended to—and did—provoke chaos and carnage within gen-pop, causing a prison riot that covered his escape.

“Is that from Dorsey?”

Cillian shakes his head. “No. The FBI still thinks someone managed to make explosive devices within the prison itself. Because the bombs were deliberately built to look like that—all the parts were shit you can source on the inside, if you know what you’re doing.”

“But they weren’t?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I frown. “Does Dorsey know this?”

“Shane’s a good asset to my organization. But there’s an unspoken rule that we don’t step on each other’s toes, professionally speaking. He doesn’t tell me how to run my business. I don’t tell him to hire better explosive experts who could see those devices were custom built to *look* homemade. But I’ve had my own people looking into this whole thing, because it smells like shit, and I want to know who shat it out. So to speak.”

Hades and I glance at each other.

“There’s something else,” Owen mutters, taking a sip of the whiskey in his hand. “Seamus isn’t the only one missing from Florence.”

My brow furrows. “Excuse me?”

“He had help.”

“Well, no shit,” Hades grunts. “But they ate shit on the way out when the guards came in.”

He’s referring to the five guards and ten prisoners who were killed during the riot Seamus engineered to mask his escape.

Owen shakes his head. “No. Someone else. It’s being kept quiet, even from us. Dorsey’s a good man, but there are things he can’t, or won’t, tell us.”

“You’re saying there’s more than one prisoner missing from the most secure prison in the country and no one’s talking about it?” I growl.

“Yes and no.” Owen takes another sip of his drink. “Originally, Florence had everyone accounted for, including the bodies. Except two of those bodies weren’t prisoners *or* guards there.”

My brother scowls. “Huh?”

Cillian nods. “A couple of nobodies. Low-level drug dealers. They were beaten and then killed; they were already dead before they wound up in Florence. Whoever planted those explosives also dropped them in there. The bodies were to cover the fact that two other prisoners escaped *with* Seamus, and to make sure the head count tallied after the dust settled.”

My teeth grind. “So he’s got two fucking guys out there with him?”

“No.”

I raise a brow. Cillian takes another slow drag on his cigarette.

“*Had*.” He exhales smoke. “At least, for about fifty miles. They were both found dead in the back of an old warehouse, alongside the torched prison laundry van they escaped in.”

Hades shakes his head. “So he killed them.”

“Very much so.”

My brother frowns. “But he didn’t torch the bodies with the van?”

“Nope.” Cillian arches a brow. “He bled them to death.”

A cold sensation drags over my skin. My mind flashes to the horrors I’ve heard about the monster who once wanted to do the same thing to a nine-year-old Neve.

“They were trussed up on makeshift crosses,” Cillian mutters quietly. “And *cut*: wrists, femoral artery, jugular. All slashed.”

Like he tried to do with Neve.

“Dorsey is aware of this?”

“I’d be amazed if he wasn’t,” Cillian grunts. “But again, our relationship is… multi-layered.”

“Have you dug into the two guys he got out with? Their affiliations?”

Cillian glances at Owen, who nods. “A bit.”

“And?” I growl.

“Well, we’re still looking into—”

“*Look harder*,” I snarl.

The older Irishman frowns and glances at Cillian. But Neve’s uncle just shrugs.

“You heard the Greek,” he growls. “Look harder. Do whatever it takes. Find out who the fuck they were and who the fuck they may have been affiliated with.”

Owen nods, polishing off his drink and standing. I turn to my brother.

“Does that Homeland Security deputy still owe you that favor?”

Hades smiles thinly. “He does.”

“Cash it in. I want to know what the Feds have on these two.”

“On it.”

My brother follows Owen out the door. When Cillian and I are alone again, he leans back against the couch, steepling his fingers.

“Neve told you, didn’t she. About Seamus, I mean.”

“She did,” I growl. “And thank you.”

“No one needs to be thanked for doing what they must for family. It’s just what you do.”

We sit in silence for a moment. “Do you really think we’re out from under this?” I ask him. “I mean, this theory that Seamus has fucked off to Vietnam or wherever?”

Cillian takes a slow breath.

“I think Owen and Dorsey are right. Seamus is a psychopath, but it’s not like he did what he did for the Irish out of fucking charity. He did it for the bloodlust, yeah. But he was also paid like a fucking king for his services. When he went down, that money moved *real quick* offshore, or into those other accounts Dorsey was talking about.”

Cillian shrugs, exhaling.

“The man was looking at dying alone in a windowless five-by-five foot cell. Now he’s out, sitting on a beach with close to thirty million in his pocket. He’s insane, but he’s not stupid.”

“What about angry, though?” I hiss. “What about vengeful against the woman who was told to lie on a witness stand at the age of nine?”

Cillian’s eyes narrow at the edge to my voice.

“I happen to know for a fact that Neve has no regrets about that. But even still—”

“She was fucking *nine,* Cillian,” I hiss.

“And that fucking lunatic almost killed her!” he snarls back. “You think I did what I did just to fuck him over?!” he spits. “Because I didn’t. I made that choice because if there was ever even a chance of that monster getting out, I knew she’d be in danger.”

I bark a cold laugh. “Well, here we fucking are!”

His eyes stab into mine in that unsettlingly psycho way he has sometimes.

“Do you know how I managed to find her, all those years ago?”

“Yeah, you beat it out of Seamus’ old buddies.”

Cillian smiles thinly.

“Do you know what hydrofluoric acid does to a man?”

My jaw tightens.

“I know it can…burn you.”

His lips stay pulled tight in a maniacal, off-putting smile as he regards his left forearm thoughtfully.

“It’ll melt your skin off. Then the muscle. Then the very bones.” He turns his gaze to me. “A man will tell you just about anything when he’s tied

down and watching his jerk-off hand dissolve into nothing but sparkling water."

I swallow a grimace.

"Or he'll tell you whatever he thinks you want him to tell you," I counter.

Cillian shrugs. "Yes. *One* might. When it's ten of them, though? And they're all telling the same tale?" He smiles. "Well…that's a story you might start paying attention to."

"Cillian tracked down anyone who'd ever been remotely associated with Seamus, and then tortured his way through them until he figured out where I was."

Jesus. And here I was thinking he'd cracked some skulls or chopped off some fingers.

My jaw clenches as I stare at the utterly calm head of the Kildare family sitting across the table from me, still smiling that cold, calculating smile.

"If you think for one second I'm taking any of this or the safety concerns for my niece lightly, then I invite you to *think fucking again*," he hisses. "Because there isn't a method I won't use, or a line I won't cross, to protect my family."

My eyes meet his.

"Nor is there for me."

And there isn't. There's not one horror I wouldn't hesitate to commit, or army I wouldn't take on myself.

There's *nothing* I wouldn't do to keep the woman I realize I've fallen completely in love with from harm.

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NEVE

"UGH, I *can't*. Hang on, okay, I'm forwarding it to you."

Ares, over three thousand miles away in London, chuckles on the other end of the phone.

"My my my. All that tough talk, and you're too chicken to—"

"Don't be a dick."

I grin as I say it. This flirty, barbed banter between us is something I've come to look forward to throughout my day. Mostly it's in person, of course. Over breakfast, or coffee. When we meet up for lunch. At night over dinner, or while watching something on TV.

In bed, in between him making me explode with his mouth, or fingers, or cock.

Currently, though, and until tomorrow, our banter has only been over the phone. Ares is in London checking in with his brother Deimos, making sure the Drakos operations over there are running smoothly. I was invited—nearly thrown over his shoulder and physically hauled to his private jet—but unfortunately, I've been stuck here tackling midterm exams. Specifically, my dreaded Urban Policy exam.

My mark for the exam was emailed yesterday, and the message is currently sitting still unread in my inbox. Because he's right: for all my tough talk, I'm freaking out too much to open it. Which is why I just forwarded the email from Professor Martell to Ares to read for me.

"*Please*? Just open it. Put me out of my misery."

"You know you aced it."

"I *don't*! Which is why I'm begging you to *pretty please* just—"

"Okay, okay. Hang on." He clears his throat. "Okay, got it."

"And?!"

Ares chuckles. "Let me read—oh. Okay…"

He exhales slowly. I wince.

"Well?"

"Bad news."

My stomach drops.

"Are you fucking *kidding* me?! How bad is it?"

"Oh, sorry, I meant bad news as in you're going to have to admit I was right. You aced it. Ninety-seven fucking percent."

The air whooshes out of my lungs as I literally drop to my knees on the living room rug.

"You absolute asshole!"

Ares cackles, which makes me grin. Because I'm a huge dork.

And because I’m apparently falling completely in love with my fake husband.

Oops.

“You’re serious?!”

“Yes, I’m serious. Open it yourself if you don’t believe me. Ninety-seven percent. Oh, it also says you got the best grade in the class, too.”

I beam, pulling up the email on my phone and staring at it. He’s right. I got the highest freaking grade in the class.

Suck a fart, Candace.

“Holy shit!”

He chuckles. “I’m so proud of you.”

A devious smile curls the corners of my lips.

“Proud enough that you’re getting on the plane right this second to come home?”

He groans. “I wish. Except I’ve got this sit down with the Italians tonight with Deimos. Tomorrow, though, I’m all yours.”

I grin.

“And I’m all yours.”

“I know you are.”

After we say goodbye and I hang up, I’m sitting on the couch trying to figure out what to do with myself when my phone rings again. This time, it’s Callie.

“Hey—”

“Congratulations!”

My brows arch. “About?”

“About your Urban Policy midterm! Best in the fucking classssss, baby!”

I blink. “Wait, how do you—”

“I just called Ares about something else and he spilled it.”

My lips curl up in a goofy grin. “He did?”

“*Gushed* about it. You two make me sick.”

I blush, rolling my eyes.

“So, what are we doing tonight?!”

“Congrats!!” I hear Eilish scream in the background.

I grin. “Where are you guys?”

“Driving through midtown. Traffic sucks,” Callie groans. “But, definitely clear your schedule tonight.”

“Because?”

“Because we’re celebrating, dork.”

I laugh. “Fine. So long as we don’t end up super sloppy drunk in a club in Brooklyn this time.”

I can hear her and Eilish muttering to each other before Callie clears her throat.

“No promises. Just clear tonight, okay? And congrats again!”

“Okay, just a little further.”

I swallow, my face flushed as Eilish and Callie guide me out of an elevator and down a hall. The blush is for two reasons: one, because I’m excited and a little nervous about where they’re taking me. It’s been wonderful being able to go back to class and pretty much go where I want the last three weeks. But, there’s still this prickly, uncomfortable feeling sometimes when I go out. Like I’m being followed, or watched.

Aside from the tails Ares has on me that he thinks I don’t know about, that is.

But I know that feeling is just my own trauma from fifteen years ago. And I know it will go away.

The second reason I’m flushed, though, is outrageously embarrassing, and I’d never tell Callie and Eilish in a million years. But the truth is that these days, thanks to Ares, the feel of cloth over my eyes, or of silky rope on my wrists and ankles makes me *excited*.

Aroused.

Turned on.

Fuck you, Pavlov.

“Okay, for real, where are we?”

Eilish giggles, pulling my arm and leading me further into…wherever we are. After picking me up from the penthouse, the two of them slapped a blindfold on me and then drove me around for at least half an hour. We could be in New Jersey or flipping Connecticut by now, for all I know.

“Okay, we’re here.”

I hear a door unlock and swing open. Then, utter silence. Even around the edges of the blindfold, I can tell we're walking into pitch darkness.

"Okay, seriously, where—"

Eilish suddenly yanks the blindfold off. The lights flick on blindingly, and I practically jump a foot in the air when a crowd of people scream "SURPRIIISE!" at me.

"*Fuck*!"

I shudder, gulping in air and forcing my heart down out of my throat. Then I blink, grinning as I stare at the crowd of familiar faces beaming at me—Cillian, Castle, Hades and Kratos, and a whole crew of people from my Urban Policy class.

Then I blink again and realize that for all the driving around with a blindfold on, I've barely gone fifty feet from the penthouse.

I'm across the street, in my old apartment.

It's devoid of furniture except for a few chairs and sofas: the whole place has been set up like a club. String lights are draped across the ceiling. Music thuds from speakers. There's even a freaking smoke machine covering the floor with fog as pulsing lights pump in time with the music—Madonna, of course.

I look around and laugh when I realize my old kitchen counter has been turned into a bar, complete with a grinning Jack from The Banshee pouring drinks behind it.

Cillian smiles as he steps in to give me a hug and a congratulatory kiss on the cheek. So do a broody Hades and a truly excited-looking Kratos. A bunch of my classmates come over to gush about my highest grade. Castle, of course, fucks up my hair.

“Congrats, kid.”

It’s all amazing. Except the one person I’d most love to be celebrating with tonight can’t be here.

Because he’s in London.

But then Eilish, Callie, and a few other of my classmates drag me out onto the dance floor, and before I know it, I’m lost in the fun. At a certain point, I pull away and head over to the kitchen bar. Jack gives me a weak smile as he passes me a cocktail.

“Hey, I just wanted to say, I’m so sorry about all that bullshit with Mike and Greg.”

My brow furrows as that particularly unpleasant memory surfaces. But I shake it off.

“It’s fine—”

“It’s really not.” His mouth twists. “Neve, I’m not just saying this because of who you’re married to. I mean, I’ve known you for years. Like, I just thought they were kind of frat boy trust fund type regulars, you know? I had no idea—”

“Jack, it’s fine. Really.”

Jack shakes his head.

“Well, fuck them both. I’m done with them, and they’re blacklisted from The Banshee, I promise you that.”

I grin. “You drinking tonight?”

“I could be persuaded? Maybe?”

“Then let’s cheers to moving on. No hard feelings.”

He grins as he pours a shot for himself and clinks it to my cocktail.

“Cheers. And thanks, Neve.”

An hour or two and a couple drinks later, I’m having a blast. All of us are. And it feels like more than just a celebration for me doing well on a test. I look over and see the way Hades is grinning with Castle—the way my sister and Callie are dancing their asses off. The way even Cillian looks strangely at ease, sitting off by himself sipping a whiskey, completely relaxed.

This isn’t just honoring my midterms results. It’s a collective breath of fresh air after the whole Seamus thing. It’s a celebration of the fact that our two families *are* actually stronger and better together than we were as enemies.

And as I look around, I sigh with happiness when I realize what that feeling is I’ve got in my chest.

Hope.

My phone dings. I slide it out of my bag and grin when I open the text message.

Ares: congratulations, wife

Me: why thank you, husband

I grin even wider when I hit send. I like typing that word: husband. I like saying it, too.

Ares: sorry again I couldn’t be there

Me: don’t be. You’ve got work, I get it

Ares: having fun I hope?

Me: loads. The whole crew is here. They even got Jack to play bartender

There’s a momentary pause before he responds.

Ares: I don’t like you near him

I roll my eyes.

Me: and cue the possessive growly husband routine. Jack’s harmless, I promise

Ares: we might disagree on that

I bite my lip. But then I start to type out the message anyway, knowing it might have consequences.

Actually, I’m hoping it does.

Me: you know, this jealous/possessive thing is actually kind of a turn on. I should tell you about the men I hang out with more often…

Ares: for their sake, perhaps you shouldn’t

My core clenches. *Goddammit*, it really is hot when he gets like this.

Ares: and for the sake of your ass

I grin impishly.

Me: and what should my ass be worried about?

Me: specifically

Ares: being bent over my knee with your panties pulled down to your knees while I spank the fuck out of it until your soaked pussy makes a mess of my slacks

Fuck.

I’m wet. Instantly. Which of course means I’m going to provoke him even more. Because between the drinks, the dancing, the adrenaline, and now dirty texts with him, by now I’m on fire.

Me: is that all? And here I was worried

Ares: careful

Me: of?

Ares: you think you’ve seen my limit of what I’ll do to you. You’ve barely fucking cracked the surface

I shiver heatedly.

Me: so, the further threat to my ass is words and talking a big game? Noted

His response comes so fast that my pulse skips. And when I read it through, it skips again as heat pools between my thighs.

Ares: the further threat to your ass is me putting you on your knees, hands bound behind your back, and *fucking it* until you can feel me in your throat

My eyes bulge. My skin tingles everywhere. My panties grow damp. *Fuck*. Why is that so outrageously hot?

After a few seconds, when I can think straight again, I respond.

Me: big talk

Ares: big cock. I hope your ass is ready for it

I shiver, panting as I grin at the glow of the phone.

Me: I want you so badly

Ares: I know

Me: tomorrow seems forever away

Ares: such an eager, good little girl

Me: stop

Ares: oh am I making you wet at your own party?

Me: seriously fucking soaked

Ares: show me

I flush deeply, shivering, but I don't respond yet.

Ares: show me how wet I make that little pussy

"Hey! Who are you—*ookaaay. WOW*."

I jolt, whirling and blushing like mad when I see the look of shock on Eilish's face. Her eyes are wide.

"I didn't see anything. I swear."

My face burns like the sun as I cringe, eying her. Because it's clear she saw at least the last few lines of my filthy exchange with Ares.

Eilish blushes too. "Okay, maybe I saw a peek." She grins. "So…I guess things are getting pretty serious with your husband?"

I snort an awkward, embarrassed laugh.

"I guess maybe you could say that."

She beams. "For what it's worth, I really like him."

Heat simmers in my core.

"Me, too."

“What are you guys doing over here?” Callie blurts as she joins us on the couch.

“Just Neve sexting your brother.”

“Am not!”

Callie snorts and makes a face. “Eww! Gross!”

“You totally are,” Eilish giggles before turning to Callie. “And hey, girl, you asked!”

“And I’m extremely sorry I did,” Callie shudders. “C’mon, let’s dance!”

They start to drag me back to the dance floor. But I pull away for a second to go back to my texting.

Me: sorry I’m being pulled back to dancing

Ares: try not to drip down your thigh

Me: says the man who got me all wet

Ares: guilty

Me: have fun at your dumb meeting. I’ll just have to find someone else to dance with now

I know I’m pushing it. And I love the thrill it gives me.

Ares: if you go anywhere near Jack, I swear to fuck, I’ll fly there right now and put him through the fucking window before I fuck you senseless on the nearest surface in front of everyone

Heat throbs in my core.

Me: promise?

I finish with a winky face for good measure.

It's past one in the morning by the time we finally call it quits. Cillian and Castle are long gone when Hades and Kratos help Callie, Eilish, Jack, and I usher everyone out of my old place. My sister and Callie walk me across the street and say their good nights at the front door. Then, I'm alone as the elevator takes me up to the penthouse.

I'm still buzzing from the drinks and all the dancing when I step out into the dark apartment. The lights of Manhattan gleam through the walls of windows as I kick my heels off and pad across the floor to the bar cart for a nightcap.

My hair is sticking to my face and my skin still glistens with sweat from all the dancing. I grin as I sip my whiskey and look out over the city that never sleeps. It was a perfect night. Again, the only thing that was missing was—

I gasp, dropping the glass to the carpet and crying out as I'm grabbed from behind. My shriek is muffled by something that has been stuffed into my mouth as I'm hauled back and tossed face-down on the couch.

Every nerve in my body screams. I'm about to try and fight for my very life when I realize something.

My mouth has been stuffed with lace.

It's a pair of my underwear.

And the powerful, masculine grip pinning me to the couch has a scent to it that I know all too well.

I whimper, going still as Ares shoves my skirt up and yanks down my panties, bending me across the arm of the couch. He roughly shoves his hand between my legs.

“Let’s see if you’re still fucking wet for me.”

Spoiler alert: I am.

Very much so.

He groans as his fingers stroke my slippery lips before sinking two of them into me. I shiver, moaning into the gag as I hear his zipper and belt. His palm spanks my ass hard, making me yelp as he keeps fingering my dripping wet pussy—the wet sounds mixing with the sting of his palm on my ass until I’m aching for him.

“This is what happens when you tease a man like me, *wife*.”

He grabs a handful of my hair as he slips his fingers from my pussy. I moan into the panties as I feel the huge, swollen head of his cock line up with my entrance. He growls, ramming into me with one powerful stroke that pushes me up onto my tiptoes. I whine in pleasure, gasping as he grabs my wrists and pulls them to the small of my back.

And then, my dark, dangerous, gorgeous husband proceeds to fuck the absolute shit out of me. One hand stays tangled in my hair while the other keeps pinning my wrists to my back as he pounds me against the arm of the sofa. His big, beautiful cock drives in and out of me, filling the penthouse with lewd wet slapping sounds as I cry out in ecstasy.

His hand leaves my hair and his palm slaps against my ass. His heavy balls bounce against my clit as his abs pound against my lower back. And suddenly, the whole night of being turned on by him explodes. I scream into the lace as I start to come, the orgasm ripping through me. I can feel myself

squeezing and clamping down around his thickness until he groans and buries every inch inside of me.

His hot cum spills into me, his hands gripping me so tightly I know he'll leave delicious marks on my skin. He holds us there, both of us shaking and gasping for air before he gathers me into his arms.

I turn, kissing him madly as my legs wrap around his waist. He groans, kissing me back and lifting my ass. His cock centers, sill hard as he drives into me once again and carries me down the hall to the bedroom.

"*You came home*," I murmur, moaning as I hungrily taste his mouth.

"I'll always come home to you."

We both freeze, halfway through the door to the bedroom. Our eyes lock and something wordless passes between us—something we've both been dancing around for weeks: the fact that this whole thing has become so much more than it was ever supposed to be.

A *lot* more.

And I'm very, *very* okay with that.

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NEVE

"OKAY, THAT'S TIME," Professor Martell nods to us all as bell rings. "Over the weekend, I want you all to start in on Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*."

A collective groans echoes throughout the class as we all stand.

"I don't care if you've read it previously for another class or in undergrad. Crack it open, start on page one, and I want notes and discussion points on at least four chapters by next Tuesday."

Shit.

I've started that book about half a dozen times before. I've never once made it past chapter two. It's not that it's a *bad* book—on the contrary, it won a Pulitzer in the seventies. It's not even the subject matter, former New York City planner and general prick of a man, Robert Moses. But it's *such* a heavy, plodding read. Like trying to read your way through an impenetrable wall.

I guess that's fitting considering who the biography is about. Robert Moses was an urban planner and public official who wielded *insane* power in this city in the twenties and thirties, and pretty much invented the idea of power brokerage in New York.

He was also a racist, power-hungry fuckhead. But I digress.

I stand with the rest of the class and start to pack up my stuff. Even with this surprise weekend reading assignment, a grin spreads over my face. I've got an hour to get home, get dressed, and ideally, fuck my husband silly before we are expected to be at the Kildare house for a joint family dinner.

"Neve? A moment before you go?"

I bite back the wince and the groan as Professor Martell fixes me with a look over the sea of exiting students. I linger, my bag slung over my shoulder before I head towards her podium as the last student steps out, leaving the lecture hall silent.

When we're alone, she eyes me cooly. She leans against the podium, drumming her fingers on the edge of it.

"Well," she says, clearing her throat and eyeing me over the top rim of her glasses. "I suppose you've seen your midterm grade?"

I blush a little, nodding.

"I did. And thank you, Professor, for—"

"Don't thank me. I don't grade out of kindness or charity, Neve. The grades I give—contrary to popular belief, I'm sure—aren't punishments or gifts."

I suck the corner of my bottom lip between my teeth, unsure why we're having this discussion. I can't help but feel like there's a "but" coming.

"No, you got that grade because you earned it, Neve." Professor Martell shrugs. "Congratulations. And well done. I'm proud of you."

I blink hard, like I've been slapped. Professor Martell catches the stunned look, too, because she arches one brow as she smirks at me.

“Do you know why I was so hard on you this year?”

Because you’re a bitch on a power trip?

I shake my head.

“It’s not because I’m a bitch, by the way.”

My face pales at her apparent ability to read my mind.

“That’s not to say I can’t *be* a bitch. But, c’mon,” she winks. “We all have our moments, don’t we?”

I smile weakly, still not sure where this is going.

“And it’s not because of your family. I didn’t pull punches because of your last name.”

“My family is a big part of who I am, Professor.”

She nods. “Which is fine. But family doesn’t define you. Trust me. My father was a part-time debt collector for the Pinelli crime family and a full-time abusive asshole. My mother died in prison after shooting him dead. Which he deserved, by the way.”

I blink.

Jesus.

“So, yeah, I know a thing or two about complicated families with baggage, Neve.”

She sighs, folding her arms over her chest.

“I was hard on you because you more than anyone else in this class this year have *so much* potential. Is it going to hurt that your family and your husband’s family wield an insane amount of power with local government?

Of course not. That's politics for you. But aside from all of that. You have so much energy and passion bottled up inside, and I was hard on you because you had no goddamn idea how to focus any of that passion. You were reckless and lacked direction. That's why I always singled you out and rode your ass."

I glare at her. But then, I frown as what she just said clicks.

"You said I *was* reckless and lacked direction."

"You were." She nods, her lips curling slightly in the corners. "And then, something changed in you a couple of months ago. It's like you learned how to focus all that passion, energy, and talent. You really hit your stride."

I smile wryly. "Well, then I suppose a thank you is in order."

She snorts. "Not to me, it's not."

I frown. "But—"

"Whatever clicked with you, Neve…it wasn't me, loath as I am to admit it. I won't take credit for channeling your focus because I don't think I did it."

She arches a brow.

"But someone did."

My expression stays neutral. But inside, I'm grinning. Because I'm thinking of a certain someone who maybe had more than a small part to play in helping me find that focus by giving me boundaries to help channel my wild nature.

Someone who grounds me as much as he lifts me up. Someone who seems to fit perfectly with the raw edges of my personality.

Someone I married, and then fell in love with.

“Thank you, Professor,” I say quietly.

She grins. “You’ve got one more semester after this one, don’t you?”

I nod. Professor Martell eyes me.

“I’m teaching an advanced lecture class on urban policy and public housing next semester.” She smirks at me. “Unless I’ve scared you off, I’d love to see you take it. I think it’d give you some interesting new perspectives.”

A grin twists my lips. “Maybe I will.”

“Good.” She winks at me and then taps the edge of her podium. “Now, go enjoy your weekend. And don’t forget…four chapters of *The Power Broker*. I’m going to be looking for your talking points in particular.”

ARES CHUCKLES as his arm loops into mine.

“She really said you were you reckless and lacked direction?”

I squint at him. “Are you saying she was wrong?”

“Oh, fuck no. She nailed you there.”

I make a face, playfully punching his arm as he chuckles. Then I’m gasping and blushing as he grabs my wrist and spins us both so that I’m now pinned flat to his chest. I look up into his piercingly dark eyes with the gold flecks. As always, my heart races a little faster.

“Well, she also said that *apparently*, someone’s helped me channel that ‘recklessly energy’.”

He smirks. “Hmm. I wonder who that could be.”

“Don’t let that go to your head.”

“Too late.”

I giggle as I reach up to kiss him right there on the sidewalk. Not thirty minutes ago, I was kissing this man with a lot more fervor, moaning his name and clawing at his back as he fucked me against the glass wall of the shower. I flush, still feeling the throb and the delicious ache from him between my legs.

“Shall we?”

I grin. “We shall.”

I hook his arm again, and we continue walking the last quarter of a block to the Kildare house. My phone buzzes, and when I open my bag to glance at it, my brow furrows in puzzlement.

Jack’s calling me. *Again*. That’s the third time today. Which is bizarre because even if we’ve had each other’s numbers since who knows when, it’s not like we talk on the phone. We catch up when I see him at The Banshee, mostly, and that’s it.

I consider answering it. But then I think of Ares’ threat to throw him out a window if I were even to have a friendly dance with the poor guy. I grin and then shiver. My husband’s almost comical overprotectiveness and vicious jealousy is both amusing and deliciously, *sinfully* attractive.

In the end I ignore the call, close my bag up, and turn to him. “Okay, so, stop me if this is weird. But, there’s this really cute girl in my class who’s also *super* tall. I was wondering if she and Kratos might hit it—”

“*NEVE*!”

I scream as Ares suddenly grabs me painfully hard and wrenches me off my feet. My head twists almost in slow motion, and my eyes widen at the sight of a beaten-up Honda Civic barreling up over the curb and across the sidewalk.

Heading straight for us.

With a snarl, Ares yanks us both behind the front stairs of a brownstone. I scream at the horrible, wrenching sound of metal twisting and shrieking as the car smashes *hard* into the other side of the steps.

My pulse is racing and my heart is hammering as I whip my head around to him.

"What the *hell* was—"

The explosion is deafening. I can feel the heat of it on my face as Ares yanks me to the ground, his body crushing on top of mine, the fireball punching through the air above us.

Sirens are screaming.

People across the street are screaming.

I'm screaming.

FIVE BUILDINGS DOWN from the scene of the blast, I'm sitting on the front steps of the house I grew up in. Eilish is sitting next to me, hugging me so tight it almost hurts. I wince, and smile as I turn to look into her terrified eyes.

"I'm *okay*, Eils."

She can’t even speak. She just shakes her head, looking ill, a faraway look in her eyes, imagining a world where Ares and I *didn’t* dodge the car that was obviously heading right for us.

Which then exploded like a bomb.

Because it *was* a bomb.

I shiver, looking at the carnage on the street. Cops and firefighters are everywhere. So are both Kildare and Drakos men, eyes darting everywhere like secret service agents.

“How’re we doing, kid?”

I turn to smile wryly at Castle as he hands me a mug of coffee.

“Much better now, thank you,” I groan, gratefully taking the mug.

Castle’s gaze lifts to the street. His jaw clenches, and I can see the fury rippling in his jaw.

“You can’t be watching me all the time, you know,” I say quietly.

His jaw just grinds even harder. I know what he’s so furious about. He wasn’t there to save me when this happened.

“Ares—”

“Just moved up about ten more positions in my book,” Castle grunts. He turns to give me a fierce look. “I’m glad he was with you.”

I smile, letting my gaze drift across the street to where Ares is sitting on the back fender of an ambulance. The EMT who’s been wrapping the shrapnel gash on his forearm nods as he finishes up. Immediately, Ares is on his feet and striding across the street to me.

“Hey,” I murmur, shivering as Eilish lets me go and my husband wraps his arms tightly around me.

“You should see one of the EMT—”

“I’m fine,” I grin, raising my eyes to his. “Thanks to someone being a lunatic and using their own body as human shield.”

Ares doesn’t smile at my joke, then jolts when a heavy hand claps down on his shoulder. He looks up to where Castle is nodding brusquely at him.

“I get the feeling you don’t want to be thanked,” my old bodyguard growls. “But, thank you just the same.”

Ares just nods and pulls me closer into him. Castle’s phone goes off, pulling him away as I furrow my brow at my husband.

“Were they giving you a transfusion?”

When he was at the ambulance earlier, when they were bandaging him up, I noticed a line going into his arm.

Ares shakes his head. “Nah. Whenever they find out I’m type O-negative, they’re always gently reminding me how in-demand it is.”

Eilish looks scandalized. “Even when you’ve just survived a *car* exploding?!”

Ares lifts a shoulder. “I offered. Might as well, seeing as they’ve got the equipment for it in the ambulance anyway, right?”

My lips curl curiously. “You’re really O-negative?”

He nods, and I grin.

“Me too.”

It’s not the rarest blood type, but if you’re O-neg, you can *only* receive other O-negative blood. I have no idea why, but knowing we have that in common brings a glow to my heart.

Ares smirks. “Glad I’ve got backup sleeping right next to me.”

I smile. When I glance back to the street, I swallow nervously as I see my uncle approaching, a cold look on his face. Castle’s with him, along with Shane Dorsey, who’s carrying a small red and white cooler.

Ares stiffens, giving Cillian his full attention when he stops in front of us.

“Tell me I was wrong about the car aiming for us,” Ares mutters.

Cillian’s eyes flit to mine. Then he shakes his head slowly.

“You weren’t.” His jaw tightens as he pulls a cigarette out of his silver case, slips it between his lips, and deftly lights it.

Agent Dorsey clears his throat. “The car was clearly rigged to blow. Nothing crazy, but enough accelerant and explosives to shred you both.”

I can feel the fury throbbing under Ares’ skin as he practically shakes with anger next to me.

“*Who*,” he rasps. The veins on his neck stand out as his jaw grinds viciously.

Dorsey glances at my uncle. Cillian takes a slow drag of his cigarette, his eyes locked onto me. Finally, he nods.

“Show them.”

Dorsey’s brows furrow.

“Cillian, it’s pretty grueso—”

“And they’re not children. *Show them*.”

My uncle’s eyes are still locked on mine as Dorsey clears his throat and steps a little closer. He lifts up the plastic cooler in his hands and pauses.

“Really, if any of you are squeamish…I’d look away.”

He pops the lid. I steel myself. Even so, when I see what’s inside, I almost vomit.

“*Fucking hell*,” Castle growls, quickly pulling Eilish toward him and turning her face away from the grisly sight before us.

There’s a *hand* inside the cooler. Specifically, a hand, wrist, and part of a forearm, blackened by fire.

I almost throw up again as the scent of charred flesh hits my nose. Just as I’m turning away into Ares’ chest, something hits me.

And it stops me *cold*.

My head swivels back, my eyes locked onto the hand.

“Neve.”

I swallow a lump as my gaze meets Cillian’s. We both understand what we’re looking at.

“We could run some tests to be sure,” Dorsey says quietly. “But the tattoo would suggest—”

“*It’s him*.”

Ares snaps his head to me as I choke out the words. My eyes are glued to the horror-show inside the cooler. Not because I *want* to look at a severed hand. But because I can’t look away from *this* severed hand.

The one that belongs to Seamus O’Conor.

“You’re sure it’s—”

“Positive,” I choke, my throat tightening.

The hand is charred and the skin is blackened. But there’s no mistaking the tattoo. I could never forget it. I still see it in my nightmares.

Rosary beads wrapped around the wrist, with a cross dripping blood and riddled with bullet holes across the back of the hand.

Seamus’ hand. I’m looking at *Seamus’ fucking hand*.

“The rest of the remains are nothing but ash in what was the driver’s seat,” Dorsey mutters. “But the explosion sent this part across the street.”

He nods at me before turning to Cillian as Ares holds me close.

“If you’re sure it’s him—”

“It’s him,” I breathe quietly.

Dorsey nods. “Then I think it’s safe to say this whole thing is really over.”

Over.

I shudder, taking a rasping breath as Agent Dorsey shuts the cooler.

On a whole nightmarish chapter of my life.

Ares still holds me tight, like I might fall apart at any moment. But I don’t. Because for the first time in fifteen years?

I’m no longer afraid.

It’s over.

The nightmare is *truly* over.

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ARES

SHE'S TRYING to keep her face a mask—something I'm sure her father drilled into her, along with a hundred other "rules of engagement", especially when it comes to negotiating deals potentially worth a hundred million dollars on his behalf.

She's good at this.

I know what's next. She'll say she needs to converse with Ricardo first. She'll hem and haw. She'll choose some arbitrary aspect of the terms I've laid out to bitch and complain about. And then, when I see the tiniest curl at the corners of Lucia Bolinaro's lips, I'll know we have a deal.

Lucia sighs, her manicured brow furrowing slightly. Her nail taps the dining room table of my penthouse.

"I don't know, Ares."

I hold back a grin. Yep, here's the hemming and hawing bus, right on schedule.

"I mean, look, it's not that I'm saying no. I just…" she shrugs casually, the neutral look remaining on her face. "Well… It's a good *start* to a deal. I'll say that much."

Bullshit. It's a solid *gold* deal, for both of our families. And she damn well knows it. But again, she's good at this.

"I'll need to speak with my father, of course."

I nod. "Of course. I appreciate it's not up to you. You're just here to relay information to him."

It's a cheap shot, but it works. I can see the anger flare in her eyes before she swallows it back.

Truth: when—not if—we do this deal, it's going to be a deal between myself and Lucia. Ricardo will look at the details after the fact, but I know damn well this is her deal to make. Even though that's supposed to be a secret.

"There's the small matter of covering the operating costs of security…"

"What about it?" I ask mildly.

Here's where she picks one random issue about the detail to harp about. Because even if the deal is dripping in diamonds, it's poor form not to at least *half* complain about something, sort of like how it's bad form not to haggle at a street market in Athens or Cairo.

"Well, if I'm understanding this, *we* will be covering all costs of that?"

I shrug. "You're the exporter and they're your ships and planes, moving your cargo, so…"

"*Our* cargo."

I shake my head. "No. Until delivery, it's yours. *Then* it becomes ours. Protection is on you. It can be your own people, a third party…anyone you trust to get the job done. But it's on your dime."

Lucia’s perfectly-done nails tap the tabletop again. Slowly, her eyes raise to mine, a smirk on her lips.

“Interesting.”

“Which part?”

She laughs. “Not the deal. I mean you.”

When I frown, she shakes her head.

“I won’t lie, Ares. When we first sat down across a very different table to begin these negotiations, I had you pegged for a mark. Or, I thought I did.”

No shit. It explains the ludicrously revealing outfit she wore to that first meeting, not to mention virtually every time we’ve been around each other since, including at my own engagement party.

Obviously, it didn’t work. Because I’m not an idiot.

“I know you did.”

She laughs. “Perhaps half knew, maybe. Yes, I had you pegged as the jaded prince of the family. The playboy who was never meant to be king and would fail. But now?” She shrugs. “You may not have been born to be the king, Ares. But you’re quite good at ruling now.”

My brow furrows. “Thanks. I think.”

“You’re welcome, but I’m not sure it’s you who deserves the praise.”

Lucia smirks when I give her a questioning look.

“I’m speaking about your wife, Ares. I think it’s safe to say the Drakos family got much more than they were anticipating in their little arrangement with the Kildares.”

My affect remains flat, but inside, I’m grinning widely. Because Lucia isn’t wrong in the slightest. Yes, maybe I have grown and stepped up to fill the role I wasn’t ever meant to. To fit the crown that was never supposed to be worn on my head.

But if Lancelot figured out how to be Arthur after all, he didn’t do it on his own.

It’s not as if Neve sat me down and gave me lessons on how to lead the Drakos empire, or show me by example. But there’s something about her. There’s some strange alchemy going on when she and I are together.

Apart, we’ve spent our lives bashing our way through the world using our stubbornness and quick tongues as battering rams against any door we come across.

Together, we’re the keys to those doors. No bashing required.

“Well, anyway.” Lucia sighs as she sits back in her chair. Her eyes hold mine for another second before she stands abruptly and marches towards the kitchen area of the penthouse.

“Is there something you need?”

She glances at me as she opens the Sub-Zero fridge. “I’m assuming the head of the Drakos empire has at least one bottle of champagne chilled in the fridge?”

She assumes correctly.

“There’s a bottle of Pol Roger in there some—”

“Found it.”

I’m still frowning when Lucia walks back to the dining room table by the window and sets down the ’99 Winston Churchill edition Pol Roger and

two flutes. She expertly opens the bottle with a dull *pop* and eyes me as she pours.

“Can I assume we’re drinking for the reason I think we’re drinking?”

“Well, as I said, I of course need to run this by my father—”

“No, you don’t.”

Lucia allows herself a small grin as she pushes a glass my way and raises hers. “To a fruitful partnership.”

I clink my glass to Lucia’s, both of us grinning as we take a sip.

A hundred-and-ten-million-dollar deal, which will pay out in the next five months.

Yeah, I can sure fucking cheers to that.

“Do you mind if I change here? I’m headed straight to the airport after this.”

I nod towards the hallway that leads to the master suite. “Feel free.”

“Thanks.”

Lucia disappears with a small bag down the hall. I stand by the window, looking out over the city and allowing myself to smile.

Lucia’s right. The Drakos family got more than they bargained for when I married Neve Kildare. *I* got more than I bargained for.

I didn’t just get a wife and sign a peace treaty.

I got a partner.

An equal.

Someone who makes my steps easier and my heart lighter.

Someone I love. Even if I haven't figured out how to tell her that yet.

The click of high heels pulls me from my thoughts. When I turn, Lucia is out of her formal business suit and wearing something more appropriate for a lavish garden party.

"I'm headed to my father's," she explains with a shrug. "He's hosting my little cousin's quinceañera."

"*Felicidades*."

She grins, plucking up her glass and moving toward where I'm standing.

"Cheers again. To the sons and daughters who take up their parents' thrones."

I chuckle. "And to making a *fuckload* of money together."

Lucia laughs as she clinks her glass to mine. Which is exactly the moment when the door to the apartment opens, and my wife walks in.

Immediately, my soaring mood drops like a rock when I see the fury blazing in her gaze, the fury that says she's hoping napalm could come out of her eyes so she could engulf Lucia in flame.

Needless to say, I realize how shitty it looks that I'm hanging out alone, drinking champagne with a woman Neve obviously still views as a rival.

She's wrong, though. There's not a woman in the world that could touch the one I married in terms of my attention and desire.

I smile as I move towards her.

"How was class—"

“Great,” she mutters flatly.

“Champagne? We’re celebrating.”

“I can see that.”

I almost grin at the look on her face. At the thin-lipped, red-headed, ball of pure Irish fury that I married.

But I don’t have a death wish, so I don’t.

“Come,” I murmur as I lean in to kiss her. She allows it…barely…but her lips are still tight. “Sit and have a glass.” My mouth brushes her ear, my voice low. “We just nailed down the details on an *insane* deal.”

“And is that all you nailed?” she says icily.

“So far,” I growl into her ear, ignoring her pointed accusation. “But let me get rid of our guest and we can easily change—”

“*So* good to see you again!” Neve pushes past me, her voice dripping in saccharine sarcasm as she smiles robotically at Lucia.

The cartel princess smiles cautiously and a little less robotically.

“So good to see you too, Neve. Ares was just—”

“It’s so funny,” Neve laughs. “I almost didn’t recognize you when I walked in, what with your tits not hanging out and all.”

Jesus fucking Christ.

Lucia’s mouth tightens. I glare at Neve when she turns to smile at me.

“I should go catch my flight.” Lucia sets her glass down and clears her throat before turning back to Neve. “You’re a very lucky woman, you know. But—”

“*Bye*.”

Lucia smiles, ignoring Neve’s withering look. “*But*, he’s an even luckier man, to have you.” She turns, heading for the door. “Ares, I’ll have my people send yours the formal agreement for signature. But yes, we are agreed on all terms. Speak to you soon.”

When the door shuts, I turn to level a cold look at Neve.

Who of course just turns and gives me an innocent “who, me?” look.

I glare at her. “*That*, for your information, was the culmination of a three-month negotiation for a hundred-and-ten-million-dollar deal. In case you were curious.”

“Oh, I was curious. But more about what that bitch was doing in our house alone with you.”

Slowly, my glare breaks as a grin twists my lips.

Wrong move. Because immediately, Neve’s face turns a deeper shade of pissed-the-fuck-off purple.

“I’m sorry, is that fucking *funny*?”

“No,” I shake my head as I move towards her. “No, it’s not. It’s just that I like you like this.”

“Like *what*, asshole?”

“Irrationally jealous.”

Her eyes narrow. “Fuck you.”

I grin. “I’d almost think you sort of like me.”

Neve’s lips purse, crimson flooding her cheeks.

“Don’t get…cute,” she mutters.

I step even closer, until I’m near enough to take her hands in mine.

“There isn’t a woman on this planet who can pull my attention from you.”

“Not even gorgeous and sexy cartel princesses with big—”

“Not a single. Fucking. One.”

Her lips purse, her jaw grinding as she looks away.

“She wants you, and it’s fucking obvious, and you don’t even see it.”

“No, she doesn’t. I think she *was* trying to play me earlier on, thinking I might be an easy mark for skewing the trade terms in her family’s favor.” I lift a shoulder. “But I wasn’t, and it didn’t. Because I only have eyes for one woman. Okay?”

Neve’s teeth rake over her bottom lip.

“Okay. But put yourself in my shoes. I mean you’re the one who threatened to fly back from London and throw a platonic friend of mine out a window if I even suggested dancing with him. And then I come home to find *her* here, dressed like a fucking supermodel, drinking champagne alone with you.”

I cup her face, lifting her chin. This time, when I kiss her softly, she doesn’t give me a tight-lipped rebuke. She melts into me, her tongue dancing with mine before she pulls back.

“I didn’t used to be like this, you know,” she mumbles.

“Like what?”

“Like a jealous, needy psycho.”

I grin. “You are *not* needy.”

“I’m a *little* needy. Only when it comes to you, though.”

“Well, you’re definitely not a psycho. *I’m* the one that made the window threats, remember?”

She grins, pulling close.

“I have an idea,” I murmur into her red locks. “We’ve got this open bottle of Pol Roger. I say we order Chinese takeout and watch dumb movies while we finish it.”

“How dumb are you willing to go?”

“Maybe Adam Sandler?”

She snorts. “Try harder, buddy. We’re talking mid-nineties Jim Carrey.”

I laugh deeply as I kiss her head. “We have a deal.”

THREE HOURS LATER, we’re mostly through the Chinese food, finished with *The Mask*, and in the middle of *Ace Ventura*. We’re also almost done with our second bottle of champagne.

I get up and head into the kitchen to grab us some water so we don’t pay too dearly for all this bubbly tomorrow. From the kitchen, I see Neve’s phone light up on the couch next to her. She lazily picks it up.

Instantly, her face breaks into a grin and she types something out before dropping it back into her lap. As I fill the water glasses, I see the phone light up again. Neve picks it back up, still grinning. But then, something switches.

Her brow furrows and her face suddenly grows serious.

“Who’s that?”

Her eyes snap to mine as I step back into the living room area.

“What?”

“Who are you texting?”

“Nobody.”

My brow furrows. What?

“I’m not prying, I was just curious. You looked concerned.”

“Well, I’m not,” she says quickly and tersely. “And it’s nobody.”

Okay, what the fuck is going on.

“Look, I just want to make sure everything’s okay. Who are you—”

“It’s none of your business,” she snaps.

My jaw tightens. “Okay, *okay,* chill out.”

I put the glasses of water down on the coffee table in front of the couch. When I sit back down next to her, though, Neve gets up. She makes a huge show of stretching and pulling her hair into a ponytail before she sits down again.

About three feet away from me.

I turn the movie back on. As it plays, I turn to steal a look at her. She’s back on her phone, her stone-cold face illuminated by the screen as she types furiously.

Fuck it. I reach over and touch her bare foot. Neve jumps, gasping as her eyes dart to mine.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she snaps.

No, you’re not.

“Will you please just tell me what’s up?”

“*Nothing*, okay?”

She types something else before suddenly, she stands again.

“I’m going out for a little bit.”

My brows knit.

“Excuse me?”

“I said I’m going out.”

“It’s eleven-thirty.”

She shrugs in this weird off-handed and cold way that only makes me more confused. “And?”

“Neve, what the fuck is going on?”

“*Nothing*, Ares!” she snaps. “I’ll be back soon, okay?”

She marches away down the hall to the bedroom.

What. The. Actual. Fucking. *Fuck*.

I grind my teeth, glaring after her. What, is she still pissed about Lucia being here? No. She was fine until someone texted her. And now suddenly she’s cold and shutting me out, and fucking *leaving*.

I’m still glowering on the couch when Neve suddenly comes exploding back out of our bedroom. Her eyes are livid, her mouth set in a vicious line, and her red hair is fanned out behind her like an apocalyptic asteroid.

“Neve, what—”

“Actually,” she snaps coldly, pure fury in her voice. “You know what?”

“Neve—”

“I *won’t* be back.”

I stand, my teeth grinding. “Excuse me?”

“*FUCK YOU, Ares*!”

I stare at her. “What he fuck is wrong with—”

“With *me*? With *ME*, Ares?!” she screams. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe I’m pissed that I married a fucking liar?!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Her face goes absolutely livid.

“I’m talking about the fucking *panties* that most certainly aren’t mine lying on our bathroom floor, you fucking *prick*.”

Shit.

“Okay, hang on. That is *not* what you think it—”

“*Don’t*,” she snarls icily. “Don’t you even fucking dare try.”

She storms for the door. I get there first, planting myself between her and the door as I glare down at her.

“Neve—”

“Get the *fuck* out of my way.”

“Lucia got changed in there to go to the airport. I’m sure they fell out of her suitcase or something.”

Neve laughs coldly.

“Wow. You really must think I’m an idiot.”

“Will you fucking listen to what you’re even saying?!” I snap. “Do you seriously think, given everything we’ve been through, given how long you’ve known me, given the fire you and I are together, that I’d—”

“*Move.*”

She glares at me so hard and with so much venom that I flinch.

“Neve…”

“Get out of my fucking *way*, Ares.”

Slowly, I step aside. Neve brushes past me and yanks the door open.

“Where the fuck are you going?”

“*Out*.”

“*Where*?”

“I don’t know, dickhead!” she hisses. “Maybe I’ll go find someone’s bathroom floor to leave my fucking underwear on.”

Pure, vicious fury explodes in my chest, bubbling out through my bared teeth and blazing eyes. It’s so apparent on my face that even Neve falters for a second. But then she swallows that back, glaring at me.

“You know what’s really funny, Ares?” She snaps. “I actually thought I was in love with you. Fucking *hilarious*, right?”

I’m still blinking in stunned shock as she blasts through the door and slams it shut behind her.

I actually thought I was in love with you.

I want to go after her. I want to drag her back here. But that won’t solve shit. Not when she’s this fucking angry. She needs to be allowed to explode at something. Maybe get a drink, or vent to her sister—or mine, for that matter.

In any case, she’s got my men tailing her. She’ll be fine.

I grit my teeth, pacing the room, forcing myself not to go after her in this moment. Let her get her rage out. Let her calm down and realize how wrong she is about the situation. I still have no fucking idea what got her all riled up in the first place, or who texted her. But I’ll deal with that part after we can talk rationally.

An hour. She gets exactly one hour to cool off. Then I’m grabbing her and dragging her back here.

I grit my teeth as I pace the room. I make myself a drink. I try turning the goddamn movie back on.

I only make it thirty-five minutes after she storms out before I’m sure I’m going to lose my fucking mind. I yank my phone out to text her.

Me: where the fuck are you

Just as I send it, my phone rings.

Neve? No, it’s Hades.

“*What*,” I snap.

“Fuck, you already heard?”

My brows knit. “Heard fucking what?”

“*Shit*.”

My eyes narrow. “*What*, Hades.”

“Look, I don’t want to be the one to tell you this—”

“I’m in *no mood* for bullshit, Hades. So what the fuck are you talking—”

“The tail on Neve just called me.”

“Why you?”

“Probably because they were afraid to tell you directly.”

I stiffen and my jaw works as my blood begins to burn hotter.

“Tell me *what*.”

Hades clears his throat uncomfortably.

“Hades—”

“Neve left The Banshee with that bartender pal of hers, Jack, about ten minutes ago. They just walked into his apartment together. Look man, I—”

I hang up. Then I almost take the front door off the hinges on my way out, pure hate and death humming in my veins.

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NEVE

“LOOK, I’m really fucking sorry, Neve—”

“*Shut up*.”

I’m so angry—so absolutely furious—that I can barely talk.

“Neve—”

“Just *shut the FUCK up*, Jack.”

He pauses at the front door to his building, fishing his keys out of his pocket.

“I’m serious, Neve. This wasn’t my idea. I swear.”

I whirl on him. “Then *why* are you doing this?!”

“I…” he winces, avoiding my eyes. “Look, I’m in trouble. Financially, I mean. And they’re going to get me out of it.”

“With *my* money?” I snap.

Jack gives sheepish look. “Neve, it’s nothing personal. Look, you’ve got tons of money, and when you pay them, they’re going to destroy the pictures—”

“Like they ‘destroyed’ them before?!”

Jack exhales unhappily as he looks away to unlock the door. My phone dings. When I pull it out, my heart wrenches when I see a text from Ares.

Ares: where the fuck are you

I can practically feel his presence through the phone, and it breaks my heart.

Yes, I was livid when I left the apartment just now. But it wasn’t just finding that pair of fucking panties on the bathroom floor. I was already keyed up, with my emotions running so hot I was about to explode before even laid eyes on them.

As Jack unlocks the door, I glance at my phone, my eyes landing on the last text messages that came in before Ares’ just now. The ones from Greg Leery, telling me he still had more of those pictures. Telling me to come to The Banshee with two hundred thousand dollars. Immediately. Or the photos would end up online.

The ones that said if I told my husband, or anyone else, what was going on, those pictures of me would go viral within an hour.

That was my mental state when I walked into the bathroom to find Lucia fucking Bolinaro’s underwear shoved halfway under the floating vanity. And given how close I was to snapping as it was, it sent me tumbling over the edge into full-scale psycho mode.

I didn’t even make it down to the lobby from the penthouse before I almost broke down and ran back to Ares to apologize. I *know* this insane idea of him sneaking around with Lucia—who is obviously just a business associate—is just my own insecurity talking. And I know I only accused him just now because I was nearing a mental breakdown after getting the texts from Greg.

After I secure those last photos, I'm going right back to Ares. I'm going to throw my arms around him, explain everything, and tell him I love him.

But first, I *have* to do this.

Wordlessly, ignoring Jack's pathetic attempts at trying to make himself look like a secondary victim in all of this, I follow him up the three flights of stairs to his apartment. He gives me one last sheepish look before he opens the door and we step inside.

Instantly, I tense as Greg and Mike get up from Jack's small couch. I've hated those two for so many years. But it's only now, being face-to-face with them again, in a small, confined space no less, that I realize it's not just hate I feel when it comes to them.

It's fear.

These two assholes may not have had sex with me or assaulted me physically. But they still violated me. They still took intimate pictures of me while I was blacked out. Not to mention the nauseating ones of them with their dicks out near my face like some sort of disgusting amateur porn shoot.

Both of them are still sporting bruised faces. Mike, from Ares beating the shit out of him outside the Banshee. And Greg, presumably, though Ares never told me the details, from when my husband got the supposedly "last" pictures from him before.

"Hey, Neve," Greg hazards.

"Fuck you both."

He smirks, like he's barely holding back a crude joke or suggestion. My stomach turns.

“Did you bring the money?”

“Yes.”

I seethe as I glance down at the purse slung casually over my shoulder. It’s not like I went to the ATM and took out two hundred grand on the way over to The Banshee, even if I’ve got that much in my trust fund. But I’ve seen Ares open the safe in the bedroom a half dozen times. I know the combination.

I feel terrible for taking it without asking, especially after the way I shut him out and then exploded at him. But when this is all over, I’ll make sure he gets that money back.

Mike makes a move to approach. But I hold the bag tight, taking a step back from him.

“You have the pictures?”

Greg nods, pulling a white envelope out of his jacket and waving it. “These really are the last ones.”

“That’s what you said last time.”

“I swear it’s true,” Greg mutters. “You have my word.”

“Your word means shit to me.”

He shrugs. “Then you’ll have to trust me. The same way we’re trusting you not to tell your prick husband about any of this.”

I sneer at him. “And what’s keeping me from doing that?”

“Nothing. But I’ll say this,” Greg glares at me. “I’ve got the ear of both the mayor and the police commissioner. If that Greek psycho comes anywhere near either me or Mike, I’ll have the city open a full-scale investigation into

the Drakos and Kildare families. You tell Ares about this, and I'll fucking tear your worlds apart. You think your sister has a shot in hell of still going to Columbia for business school after every single bit of your family's dirty laundry ends up splashed all over the news?"

I swallow, hatred flowing from my eyes into his. Greg just shrugs. "It is what it is, Neve. Now, are we doing this or not?"

My teeth grind.

"*We are*."

I hold my hand out as I unsling the bag from my shoulder. Greg hands me the sealed white envelope as Mike plucks the bag of money from my grip. I watch the two of them yank the bag open and start to paw through the stacks of cash as I march into Jack's kitchen.

Wordlessly, I light his gas stove, touch the corner of the envelope to the flame, and then drop it into his sink. I watch in cold, icy fury as the paper burns away. Then as the Polaroids within curl and smoke in muted colors as the chemicals catch fire. I watch until the flames are completely out before turning to level a chilling look at the three guys.

"Happy?" I snap.

Mike grins at me. "Happy. Pleasure doing business with you, Neve."

"Go fuck yourself." I shake my head angrily, holding back tears and emotion. "You two are a couple of fucking *disgusting* excuses for human beings, I hope you know that."

Greg shrugs. I sneer at them.

"And now you managed to even get Jack mixed up in this shit? Because he needs the money?"

Greg’s mouth drops open.

“Is that what he told you?”

Jack shoots him a quick look. “Leery, c’mon, man—”

“Jack’s doing just fine, Neve. Shit, he makes a killing flirting with all those hipster chicks at The Banshee.”

Jack swallows. “Dude, enough—”

“He’s mixed up in this, because he’s *always* been mixed up in it.”

My face pales as I slowly turn to see Jack looking at the floor, looking extremely uncomfortable.

“What the fuck is he talking about?” I hiss quietly.

Jack just shrugs and looks away.

Mike snickers. “Neve, come on. Who the hell do you think *took* those pictures that night?”

It feels like I’ve just been punched in the stomach. I wince, choking a little as my eyes snap back to Jack. Jack, who’s been my favorite friendly bartender for years. Jack, who I’ve always considered a good friend. Jack, who’s been to my goddamn *house*.

“*Jack*…?” I choke.

I want it so badly not to be true. But when he looks up with a nauseated, horrible look on his face, I know Greg isn’t lying.

“You *motherfucker*,” I whisper.

“Neve, I’m so fucking sorry. Everyone was drinking. And, you know, I knew it was fucked up. But Leery said it was just a prank, and—”

“You’re all dead.”

He stops babbling as the words tear brutally from my lips. I turn to level a vicious look at Greg.

“Do either of you honestly think I’m scared of your pathetic threats?”

The smirk drops from his lips as he and Mike glance at each other.

“Neve, if you think I’m bluffing—”

“Oh, I don’t. I think you’re a joke, actually.”

I’m done. Fuck this, and fuck *them*. My family alone has enough power to shut down whatever bullshit Greg thinks he might be able to stir up. But with the Kildare and Drakos alliance?

He’s not going to just get shut down.

He’s going to get buried.

Literally.

“I think you’re *all* fucking pathetic jokes,” I hiss. “Do you have any fucking idea what it means to threaten me and my family? Or what it means to threaten the family I’ve married into? Never mind the two families together.” I laugh coldly as Greg, Mike, and Jack all grow a little paler.

“Do you honestly think I’m still some teenager you slipped a fucking roofie to?” My lips curl dangerously. “Because I’m *not*. I’m a fucking *queen* now, you stupid, limp-dicked pieces of shit.”

Greg swallows uneasily, shifting nervously on his feet.

“Okay, okay. Hang on. Look, it’s done, okay? We can all just walk away—”

“Wrong.” I smile coldly at him as I square my shoulders. “In fact, you’re so fucking wrong it’s actually funny, Greg. No. I ‘walked away’ from this years ago. Then again last month. But then you were stupid enough to walk right back to it again.” I shake my head. “No, assholes, your last chance to ‘walk away’ was when my husband beat the fuck out of both of you. That was it. That was your wipe the slate clean card. But now?”

My lips curve up in a dangerous smile. My pulse roars with power, vengeance, and the absolute absence of fear.

“Now? He’s going to fucking kill you all.”

“No, he won’t.”

The voice behind me is like a blade cutting into my throat and severing my vocal cords. It’s the voice from my nightmares. The voice of death itself.

The voice of a monster.

In slow motion, I watch confusion and then fear twist across the faces of the three men in front of me. I begin to turn around, everything sluggish and slow, like I’m moving through waist-deep snow. When I finally do see who they’re looking at, the very floor drops out from under me.

Seamus O’Conor. Still very much alive, and still very much with two hands.

“No, he won’t,” he growls again in a chilling, flinty voice. “But I will.”

The gun in his hand raises. My hands fly up to my face, but then he’s firing past me—three shots, all fired with the world’s most bland, unemotional look on his face.

Three bodies hit the floor behind me. But I can’t look away. I can’t breathe, or talk, or even blink as my monster grins pure evil at me.

“Hello, little bird. Time to go.”

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ARES

THE BLACKNESS in my heart is as dark as the night as I stare at the front of Jack's apartment building. The last shred of my self-control tried to convince the rest of me not to bring a gun. But fuck that.

Still, as I reach into my jacket to finger the 9mm in its holster, I know it'll mostly be for the intimidation factor.

If I kill this motherfucker for putting his hands on my wife tonight, it'll be exactly how promised I would: via a fucking window.

Yet, deep down, I know there's got to be something else going on here. Maybe some women would react this way—run off to some other guy the second there's one slight misunderstanding. But not Neve.

She might be tempestuous. She might be a force of fucking nature, like a goddamn hurricane, when she gets angry.

But this isn't her. I *know* my wife. I know her maybe even better than she knows herself, and this doesn't check out. Plus, there was the whole thing with her weird behavior on the phone before she even found those goddamn panties in our bathroom.

No. Something's up. Something's potentially very wrong, too. Well. Whatever it is, I'm about to find out.

Before I head in, I march over to the black SUV where two of my guys—the ones who called Hades—are camped out after tailing Neve and Jack here. I'm sure Hades is on his way too, despite me warning him to stay away.

Probably to make sure I don't do something incredibly dumb like killing Jack in full view of a security camera or a cop or something.

No promises on that yet.

But Hades isn't here yet. Good. I want it to stay that way.

I sidle up close to the open window of the passenger door, still keeping an eye on Jack's building.

"Both of you stay out here. If my brother shows up, keep him out here. Is that understood?"

When neither of them answers me, my brow furrows as I drag my gaze away from the fucker's building.

"I *said,* is that fucking—"

Oh fuck.

Both men are still buckled into their seats, their chins limp against their chests…

…with wet, glistening blood slicked across their slit throats and soaking the fronts of their shirts.

I bolt instantly, rushing to the front door of Jack's building as the low whine of an alarm blares. I smash in the front door with a heel against the lock and

go charging in.

One of the first-floor apartment doors yanks open, and a grizzled older guy charges out brandishing a baseball bat with a Mets logo emblazoned on it. When he sees the gun in my hand, he stiffens.

“Look, pal, I don’t want any—”

“Jack—” I snarl, realizing I have no idea what the motherfucker’s last name is. “The hipster bartender fuckhead,” I hiss. “*Where*.”

The man nods quickly, pointing his bat up the staircase. “Third floor! Number three-oh-seven!”

I run up the stairs two at a time, cold, naked fear slicing through my veins. I charge down the hall and hit Jack’s door with my full weight behind my shoulder, splintering it open. I freeze as I spill inside and I see—

Oh, Christ.

There are three bodies on the floor. Blood is pooling under all three of them and is splattered against the wall behind them.

Jack, Mike Jennings, and Councilman Greg Leery.

“NEVE!”

I roar as I stumble through the tiny apartment. But there’s no sign of her. Not in the bedroom, or the closet-sized bathroom, or the tiny kitchen nook.

She’s not here.

I’m seeing red and my vision is blurred as I yank out my phone and dial her number. I hear it ring, and my heart drops when I spot her phone lighting up on the floor alongside her keys, surrounded by the pool of blood.

Fuck.

When I hear the creak of footsteps behind me, I snap out of my cold fear in a nanosecond. I whirl, teeth bared and gun raised, only to come face-to-face with Castle.

His eyes leave mine to stare at the carnage behind me.

"*Jesus fucking Christ*," he breathes. His gaze snaps back to me, his eyes wary. "You?"

I slowly shake my head.

Castle frowns. "You can lower your fucking gun now, Ares."

I keep it right where it is, trained on him.

"What are you doing here, and how did you get here so fast?"

His lips curl.

"*Take it easy*. I gave her a panic button for her keyring back when she was still in high school. It sends an alert to my phone. She pushed it ten minutes ago."

My nostrils flare. Fury mixed with naked, all-consuming fear for Neve's safety and well-being cloud my vision and dull my senses until I realize Castle is barking my name.

"I said ARES!"

I blink, ripping myself out of the haze.

"I am *not* your enemy, Ares," he hisses. "Lower the gun, and let's find her."

I swallow and my hand drops to my side just as footsteps thunder up the stairs. Castle and I both spin and crouch behind the doorway with guns out. Suddenly Hades, Kratos, and Cillian come charging into the apartment, with Owen Foley wheezing in after them.

Cillian stops cold, staring at the bodies. Slowly, his gaze rips to me.

“Where the *fuck* is my niece, Ares?”

My lips thin. “I don’t know. But I’m about to tear this fucking city apart to find her.” I turn to my brothers. “Everybody out. I want this entire goddamn city turned upside and inside out. Break down doors. Use whatever force you have to.”

“We’ll find her,” Hades growls.

“I’ve got men pulling up downstairs now,” Cillian snarls. “Tell them I told you this is a code red. They’ll give you whatever assistance you need.”

Kratos and Hades bolt out of the apartment. I turn to Cillian.

“That FBI friend of yours… Just how much power does he wield?”

“What do you need?” Cillian murmurs.

“I need him to shut down every single exit point in the fucking city. I want cops or agents at every fucking bridge and tunnel. Treat it like a full-scale missing person alert where the missing person is the fucking President of the United States.”

Cillian nods grimly before he and Castle run after my brothers. I’m about to leave too when a hand lands on my arm.

“Ares, a moment?”

I turn to grit my teeth at Owen.

“I don’t *have* a fucking moment. In case you missed it, someone’s just kidnapped my fucking wife—”

“Which is precisely why you need to hear this.” Owen’s eyes dart to the open doorway. “I didn’t want to say this in front of your brothers and risk

anger clouding their ability to get Neve back safe and sound. Or in front of Cillian, for the same reason."

"*Arrive* at the fucking point, Owen," I snarl.

"Do you know where Ezio Adamos is?"

I stare at him, going cold.

"Right now at this very moment, I mean."

"I have no goddamn idea."

Owen swallows. "Indeed. Ares, I'm sorry to say this, but I believe Ezio was working with Seamus."

I stare at him. "That's impossible."

"As Cillian mentioned, I'm friendly with a certain Homeland Security officer who owes me a few favors…"

"And?" I snap.

"And the two men who escaped with Seamus and wound up dead had recently received money into offshore accounts—a million each." He watches my eyes carefully. "Both deposits came from shell companies owned by the Adamos family."

Everything goes still. A ringing sound begins to whine in my ears as my blood turns to fire.

"Then we'll start at Ezio's house," I hiss.

Where I'm going to cut off his fucking skin.

I whirl towards the door.

"Ares, there's actually something else you need to know."

I turn back to see Owen looking even more pale.

"*What*?"

He swallows. "About an hour ago, NYPD responded to a call from a restaurant next to a tattoo parlor in the Lower East Side, complaining about a smell."

Owen swallows again and clears his throat.

"They found two bodies. They'd been dead about two weeks."

"Owen, how the *fuck* is this relevant?"

He continues on, as if I hadn't said a word. "The tattoo artist was tied up crucifixion-style and had been bled out from cuts to his wrists and neck."

My pulse thuds.

"And the second body was an older man—bound…gagged…" Owen's lips draw to a line. "And missing a hand."

Reality punches me in the face. I stare at Owen, then at the bodies on floor, as the ground gives way beneath my feet. All three bodies with neat, execution-style shots right through the center of the forehead, with a second shot through the back of the head after they were down for good measure.

Clean kills.

Professional kills.

Holy fuck.

That monster isn't dead at all. And now, he's come back to finish what he was stopped from doing years ago to the woman I love.

"We need to go, *now*."

I start to make for the door.

“Oh, Ares. One last thing.”

The metal pierces my neck just as I glance back at Owen. My eyelids flutter and my mouth goes slack as something cold begins to instantly drag me down. Owen steps away from me, the syringe still in his hand as I sag against the door frame.

“What…the…fuck…”

“You look tired, Ares,” Owen says meditatively. “I think all this stress is getting to you.”

“*Motherfucker…*”

“I think you’d better lie down.”

The whole apartment goes sideways as my legs give way.

I’m out before I hit the ground.

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NEVE

THEY SAY HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF.

So do nightmares.

Please. Not here. Not again.

Every part of my brain screams that this can't be real. That I must be dreaming, trapped in a fever nightmare.

Schick.

Schhhick.

This is no fever dream. The way the sound of the knife being sharpened against a stone across the room sends ice-cold chills over my skin is proof of that. The way my stomach drops through the floor, and the way the fear threatens to choke me to death, is proof of that.

No. I'm not dreaming.

This is reality, and I am wide fucking awake.

I shiver in the chair I'm tied to. The cabin is even smaller than I remember it. The only furniture is the chair I'm sitting in, the one *he's* sitting in, and a

tiny table, with the whetstone, a few gallon jugs of water, a tool box, and a small first aid kit on it.

The cabin is also filthier than I remember it. Crumbling, too—the ceiling above me is sagging, the windows are boarded up with rusty nails, and the floorboards squeak even if I barely shift my weight in the chair. Like I just did.

At the telltale creak, the man across the room sharpening his knife pauses. He turns, and I swallow back pure terror as his steely gray eyes lance into mine.

“You remember this place, don’t you, little bird?”

Little bird.

Fifteen years ago, he called me the same thing. In the same cabin, after the same drive, in a similar van. I *know* we’re in the same place.

The problem is, I doubt anybody else does.

I tremble, trying so hard not to show any fear as Seamus grins at me. But when he just grins wider, I know I’ve failed.

“Ahh, good. You do remember.”

I swallow nervously as his eyes stab into me, his hand coming up to push his long hair behind his ear.

Again, under wildly different circumstances, in some alternate reality, Seamus O’Conor could be considered a handsome man. He’s tall and broad-shouldered, with lean, muscled hips and powerful arms. I mean the man is in his late sixties, and he looks like he could take on guys Ares’ age.

His hair is longer than it was all those years ago—silver and straight, down to his shoulders now. But the beard—the same bullet or blade color as his

eyes and hair—is still short and cropped.

It's actually not even an alternate reality where Seamus could be considered handsome. Before I forced myself never to look into those disturbing corners of the Internet again, I saw plenty of the nauseating "fan clubs" that fixated on him. Whole forums of mostly women, but also some men, who fawned all over this monster. The same types who fetishize Dahmer and Bundy.

This man is a *horror* on the world. And yet there are people out there who've spent the last fifteen years using lawyers to petition for a conjugal visit with him.

Humanity can be dark beyond your worst nightmares once you peek behind curtains like that.

Seamus' teeth flash white before he goes back to his blade. I shudder as he drags it slowly over the whetstone, over and over again.

Schick.

Schickkk.

"You hurt me, little bird."

When I don't say anything, he pauses with his blade.

"You sang such a pretty song all those years ago, to all those lawyers and that judge." He turns to me, his teeth flashing again before his eyes narrow. "Such a pretty little *pile of lies*."

It doesn't matter that it was the truth. That he really did kill all those people in such horrifying, brutal ways. We both know what *I* said in court wasn't true. Just as we both know my lies are what put him away.

"You clipped my wings, little bird," he murmurs quietly, eyeing me coldly.

“If I could have clipped your *head*, I would have.”

He grins broadly as I croak out the words.

“Ahhh, such lovely fire in you,” he chuckles quietly. “That would be from my sister’s blood in your veins, wouldn’t it?” His eyes turn vicious. “It certainly isn’t from the poisonous Kildares. If I could separate the two in your bloodstream, I would.” He shrugs, smiling as he twirls the surgically sharp blade in his hand. “Pity that’s not possible.”

Suddenly, I hear car tires crunching outside. My heart soars and my eyes dart to the door. But when Seamus just chuckles as he goes back to his whetstone, the fantasy that I’m about to be rescued collapses.

Outside, the engine shuts off. I hear doors opening and closing, and then a wheezing, scuffling, grunting sound that gets closer and closer. The door kicks open. At first, when I see Owen Foley walk backwards into the cabin, my hopes shoot through the roof again.

Until my hope turns first to confusion and then dread when I realize why he’s walking backwards. Why he’s huffing and puffing, and red in the face. Why he barely even glances at me.

He’s dragging a bound, unconscious Ares.

No.

Owen wheezes some more as he drags Ares by the ankles into the cabin. He turns to glare at Seamus.

“You could fucking help,” he blurts angrily.

“I *could*.”

But Seamus doesn’t move from his chair. Owen glares at him some more before dragging Ares to the middle of the room and dropping him in a heap

before shuffling over to slam the door shut again.

That's when Seamus finally rises. He rolls his shoulders, taking a breath before picking up his knife and strolling over to the man I love who is lying slumped on the ground.

"Don't you dare fucking touch him!" I hiss.

Seamus pauses as he crouches down next to Ares. He glances up at me, grinning sadistically.

"You mean like this?"

He drags the tip of his knife across Ares' forearm, opening the skin. It's not a deep cut: it's not meant to be. It's meant to make *me* hurt as I watch him make my husband bleed.

Ares stirs slightly, not waking, just groaning quietly, his eyes still shut.

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!"

Seamus chuckles, glancing at me as he brings the blade to Ares' pushed-up shirt sleeve and wipes it clean. Then he stands and goes back to the little table with the whetstone.

Schick.

Ssschick.

I drag my eyes to Owen, who's doing his best not to look at me.

"*Owen…*" I croak.

He winces. Finally, his gaze drags to mine.

"*Help me*!"

Behind him, Seamus chuckles quietly. Owen glares at him. When he turns back to me, his face is dark.

“I’m sorry, Neve. But this is how it has to go.”

I shudder, staring at him in a mixture of horror and disbelief. “What?! Owen, why are you—”

“Because it was supposed to be *me*!” he roars. Gone is the normally-slightly-drunk, ruddy-faced, quick-with-a-dirty-joke Owen Foley I’ve known my whole life. The man who glares at me with hatred in his eyes is a stranger I’ve never met before.

“*I* was supposed to be the king of New York, Neve,” he growls again. “It was supposed to be *me*.”

I swallow, shivering as I stare at him. “Owen, I—”

“You’ve never been told about your grandmother, have you? The story was hushed up when she bore that bastard you called Father. Then it was buried for good, once her precious little boy, sired by a man who couldn’t even be bothered to leave his *wife* for her, was declared a Kildare.”

I stare at him, not really following.

“*I* was supposed to marry Sheila O’Conor.”

My heart skips.

Sheila as in, my grandmother—the woman Cillian’s father had an affair with, before Cillian himself was born, resulting in my father.

“I should have killed Brendan the minute he started trying to charm her. But he was too quick to wield that magic Kildare name the Council of Clans so loves to fawn over. Then he kept coming back, over and over, until finally, he managed to worm himself into her bed.”

Owen sneers at me.

“Anyone else, and I wouldn’t have thought twice about putting a bullet in him. But this was the head of the magnificent *Kildare* family. The king himself *deigned* to fuck the woman I was promised to. And when she got pregnant with your father, the council dissolved the betrothal agreement between us.”

Owen pulls a flask out of his pocket, his eyes angry as he takes a greedy swig from it.

“Declan was an O’Conor first, of course. After all, his father was married to another woman, and his conception itself was a scandal. But then Brendan and his *actual* wife, Moira, had Cillian back in Ireland. And now that he had a true heir, Brendan petitioned the Council to have Declan’s last name changed to Kildare, so that he could grow up to act as prince of the second, American Kildare empire here in New York.”

His eyes stab angrily into me.

“That was meant to be *my* kingdom. It had already been decided by the council when my marriage to Sheila was agreed on. The Foleys and the O’Conors were the two most powerful Irish families in New York at the time. A marriage uniting them would have created a true dynasty, with me sitting on the throne. And it all went up in fucking flames when your goddamn grandfather stuck his fucking prick in—”

“My sister, yes,” Seamus growls quietly, turning to shoot a withering look at Owen. “I know. And I’m growing tired of your bleating.” He stands, twirling the knife in his hand.

Owen glares back at him. “Well? Are you going now?”

Seamus smiles evilly. “Going where, my fat friend?”

Owen ignores the insult. “To deal with Cillian.”

My eyes go wide. Owen catches it, turning to shrug.

“It is what it is, Neve. I’ve done my time. I’ve acted as number two to the Kildare family my entire life. I am *owed* this!”

“What do you mean *deal with* Cillian?” I choke.

Owen’s mouth thins. “The Foleys are the top vassal family to the Kildares, Neve. And the Council is still very much patriarchal, I’m afraid. In the absence of a male Kildare heir…” he smiles. “*I* ascend the throne. So Cillian needs to be eliminated.”

“But I—”

My mouth snaps shut before I can say “but I’m *married* to the technical ‘male Kildare heir’.”

Owen reads my thoughts. His eyes drop to Ares, then slide back to me.

“Indeed. I’m sorry, Neve.”

No.

My eyes bulge, my pulse roars.

“*NO!*”

Owen ignores me, turning to glare at Seamus. The monster himself is leaning against the wooden beam propping up the sagging middle of the cabin’s ceiling.

“Well? The Kildare forces are spread all over the five boroughs right now. There’ll never be a better moment to strike. If you leave now, you can be in the city in less than five—”

“I’ll deal with him later.”

Owen frowns. “No, our agreement was to take Neve to sow dissent and chaos within the Kildare ranks. Then you go take out Cillian. *Then* you return here and take out Ares. That’s how I seize power—”

“I said *later*,” Seamus snaps viciously, making Owen shudder and take a step back. “After I’ve dealt with her.”

My blood turns to ice as Seamus’ eyes slide to mine. His lips curl maliciously as he twirls the blade thoughtfully in his hands.

Owen’s face goes white.

“*No*,” he hisses. “No, you’re not hurting her. That wasn’t our plan.”

Seamus chuckles quietly.

“That wasn’t *your* plan. Me, I find plans…tedious. Confining.”

He starts to push past Owen, moving towards me. The older Irishman moves in front of him, blocking his path and getting in Seamus’ face.

“I *freed* you, you fucking prick.”

Seamus smiles coldly. “Indeed. Regretting your choices yet?”

Owen’s back is to me, and I watch as his hands creeps towards the gun stuffed into the back of his pants.

“I *will* be king of this city, you motherfuck—”

I scream when Seamus’ arm flicks out swiftly and Owen’s words turn to a horrifying wet gurgle as the blade slices his neck. I scream again as blood sprays sideways against the door and the wall before Owen’s body collapses to the floor next to Ares.

The cabin is silent except for my thudding heart. Seamus chuckles quietly as he gently wipes the blade off with a handkerchief from his pocket. His gaze drops to Owen's body.

"Do you feel like a king now?"

Suddenly, he's surging towards me. I kick and scream as he moves behind me, but he's far stronger than me, and it's no use. I flinch when I feel him cut some of my bounds. Then I'm gasping as he hauls me back to the wall behind me.

"*Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war.*"

He shoves me against the wall, and suddenly, he's shoving one of my arms up and out against it. Rough rope loops around it, and when it pulls tight, I go stiff.

Oh God, no…

"His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed which no one knows but himself."

Seamus murmurs the words from the book of Revelation in a reverent whisper, his voice cold and brutal.

"*He is clad in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is The Word of God.*"

I'm numb, frozen in abject terror as he grabs my other arm and shoves it against the wall too—also extended out away from my body. There's a rope there as well that goes tight before he drops to his knees and starts to bind my ankles to the wood wall at my back.

No, not a wall.

He’s tying me to a fucking *crucifix*.

“*And the armies of heaven, arrayed in fine linen, white and pure, followed him on white horses.*”

“Please…”

Seamus chuckles, grinning demonically into my frozen, terror-stricken face.

“I’ll enjoy listening to you beg, little bird.”

He raises his hand; The Executioner lifting his axe. The blade glints like death itself as he lowers it slowly to the bare, soft skin of my wrist.

“*From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to smite the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, King of kings and Lord of lords.*”

The tip of his knife traces lightly over my skin, turning me to ice as horror explodes through every nerve in my body.

This isn’t how this ends.

This *cannot* be how this ends.

My gaze darts to the door, as if it’s going to magically open with help pouring through. But it remains closed, and my eyes fall to the man still out cold on the ground, bleeding slightly from the arm.

I never told him I loved him.

Seamus steps in front of me, blocking my view of Ares as his eyes meet mine. “The blood of the innocent, little bird,” he murmurs with deranged look in his eyes. Then he smiles thinly. “Or maybe the not-so-innocent.”

No…

It hurts when the blade cuts into my flesh. I bite down hard, clenching my jaw, refusing to give him the satisfaction of hearing my pain. Seamus grins, his eyes wide with a zealous hunger as he cuts another line across my wrist.

Blood begins to pour in dark ribbons from my veins.

Oh God…

Seamus crosses himself before he turns to the other outstretched arm. The blade slices me there too, once, twice, opening my soft skin and letting the red weep down my arm and spatter onto the floor.

He steps back, grinning, then turns. And I finally break my silence when he kicks Ares hard in the stomach.

"*NOOO*!"

My husband groans, his eyelids flickering.

Seamus turns back to me.

"A pity. It seems he'd like to sleep in today. I'd hoped he could watch you die before his very—"

"Get the fuck away from her!"

Seamus whirls. My eyes snap past him, my heart lurching when I see Ares. He's up on one knee, his eyes bleary and unfocused, and it looks like a strong breeze might knock him over. He's still got one hand tangled up in the ropes that were binding him. But the other is free.

And it's holding Owen Foley's gun.

"I said *get the fuck away from*—"

Seamus begins to chuckle.

“Ahh, the little dragon prince is awake,” he snickers quietly. “You can’t even see straight, can you?”

“Straight enough. Cut her the fuck down, *now*.”

Seamus smiles. “Interesting choice of words.”

Ares grimaces, his eyes half closing before he forces them to open and focus.

“I said—”

It all happens so fast I don’t even have time to scream. One moment Seamus is chuckling quietly. The next, he’s rushing at Ares like a runaway freight train. I watch my husband’s lips curl, and his finger pull the trigger of the gun. But Seamus was right.

He can barely stand, let alone see straight.

The shot sprays into the ceiling as Seamus plows into him. I scream as the older man wrenches the gun from Ares’ hand with a demonic howl. He kicks his legs out from under him, and I cry out as Ares crashes to the ground with a groan.

Instantly, Seamus has him from behind—dragging him back up to his feet, an arm around Ares’ neck.

The gun barrel jammed against his neck.

“*Now*, little dragon…” Seamus hisses coldly.

My vision starts to blur. Swallowing thickly, I turn, my face feeling white and clammy as I watch the life ebb out of my sliced wrists.

“Now, Drakos,” Seamus murmurs. “You get to watch the blood of the innocent wash away the sins of the wicked.”

The room starts to fade to black.

“Now you get to watch her die.”

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ARES

I WAKE TO BLINDING, searing pain everywhere. My head throbs, and I think my ribs might be broken. I blink, my vision only half working, at best. Blood flows from a long if shallow cut on my arm, slowly pooling sticky and warm beneath me.

Where the fuck am I?

My mind churns in overtime, trying to piece it together. I remember looking for Neve.

I remember finding the men who had been tailing her, dead in their car.

I remember the three fuckers upstairs in Jack's apartment, also dead.

And then suddenly, the last piece comes back to me.

Owen.

I try to move, but I can't. I can't even see more than three inches in front of me, because my vision is still blurred from whatever that fuckhead jabbed me with. My lips curl. When I find him—

My eyes suddenly focus about a foot in front of me.

It’s Owen, eyes wide and staring unblinkingly at the ceiling as he lies next to his gun in a puddle of blood, his throat cut open.

Someone’s talking. Reciting. Quoting? I frown, trying to place the voice and the words, but I can’t. For a second, I get flashbacks of my father dragging us to church, where the hardline Orthodox priest would rain down fire and brimstone on us sinners in both Greek and English.

That’s what I’m hearing right now. It’s Revelations.

My eyes start to close as the darkness tries to drag me under again. But suddenly something hard slams into my aching ribs, making me grunt and flinch, waking me up a little.

The voice is talking again. This time, I won’t let myself go back to sleep. I force my eyes to remain open. I force them to focus on the two shapes across the filthy floor from me—one pacing, the other just standing there with their arms spread out wide.

Suddenly, everything flickers into focus.

And I want to scream.

I see Neve—terror on her face, blood pouring down onto the floor from angry-looking gashes in her wrists. My gaze swivels to the man pacing in front of her.

Seamus.

Everything suddenly becomes clear. And suddenly, with an explosive adrenaline strength I never even imagined a human could posses, I manage to move.

I can still feel the rope biting into my wrists, pinning my arms behind my back. But I grit my teeth and yank, ignoring the pain of the rope cutting into

me. The blood soaked into the floor underneath me—mine, and probably Owen's, too—coats the rope and my wrists, turning everything slick and slippery.

My muscles bulge, and suddenly, I've got one arm free. My hand slides wetly across the pool of blood, my fingers sticky as they curl around the cold metal of Owen's gun. Pain explodes through me as I lurch to one knee, raising the gun and taking aim at the man hurting her.

"Get the fuck away from her."

He turns. So does Neve, her eyes bulging as her gaze locks with mine.

"I said *get the fuck away from*—"

Seamus starts to laugh quietly.

"Ahh, the little dragon prince is awake," he grunts. "You can't even see straight, can you?"

"Straight enough. Cut her the fuck down, *now*."

His brow lifts. "Interesting choice of words."

My jaw tightens.

"I said—"

Fuck.

He charges me like a bull. I aim as best as I can, considering my vision is utterly fucked right now. But it's not good enough. He hits me just as I squeeze the trigger, and the shot blasts into the ceiling.

Then, it's game fucking over.

My adrenaline is gone. So is my grip on the gun, as O'Conor rips it from my hand. His arm circles my neck hard from behind, choking me as he pins my back to his chest. I snarl and try to shove an elbow back. But that arm is still tangled in the rope.

The gun suddenly presses to my neck, and I go still.

"*Now*, Drakos," Seamus hisses coldly. "You get to watch the blood of the innocent wash away the sins of the wicked."

No.

"Now you get to watch her die."

NO.

My eyes lock with Neve's. I start to open my mouth, to tell her it's going to be okay. To tell her I love her.

One of those is the truest thing I've ever known.

There's a good chance the other is a lie.

"*Neve-*"

The blood is flowing out of her veins *way* too fast. The cuts are deep, and I'm literally watching the color—and life—drain out of her before my eyes.

She's fucking dying.

She's fucking DYING.

"*And I will execute great vengeance upon them with furious rebukes*."

Seamus starts to recite biblical verses into my ear again. I'm barely listening. All I'm doing is staring at the woman I love.

“*And they shall know that I am the Lord, when I shall lay my vengeance upon them.*”

She’s the woman I love.

And I will *not* watch her fucking die.

I dig deep. I channel everything I have left within me, and I force myself to move. I wrench one of my arms free of Seamus’ grip. My hand flies up, grabbing his hand and the gun it’s holding with slick, bloody fingers.

Seamus chuckles quietly into my ear.

“What do you possibly think you can—”

I use everything left in the tank for one move. My arm yanks, ripping the gun barrel away from my neck and shoving it against my shoulder. My bloodied hand slides over Seamus’.

My finger curls around his, over the trigger.

I love you, Neve.

Seamus roars as he realizes what I’m about to do.

“*No*—!”

I love you.

My eyes close.

And my finger squeezes as hard as I can.

The gunshot is deafening and slams into me with so much force that it feels like I’ve been hit by a train. Both Seamus and I fly backwards as the bullet travels clear through me and into him, the two of us collapsing in a tangle on the floor.

At first, I can’t move. I blink, hearing nothing but the ringing in my ears and feeling nothing at all.

Then the pain comes.

Hard.

Dazed, my gaze drifts lazily to the side, to the jagged bullet wound through me just south of my shoulder. My arm on that side feels useless, and I’m pretty sure my collarbone is shattered.

I’m also pretty sure I don’t have long before I bleed out.

I need to move fast.

I only give Seamus the briefest of glances. It’s clear he’s dead by the gaping, bleeding hole in chest, right over his heart.

I spit on his body as I stagger to the table—to the tool kit and the first aid kit, praying to God I’m not too late.

You can’t be dead.

I won’t fucking let you be dead.

I grab what I need from both, sending the table crashing over as I lurch back across the cabin. Neve’s lost consciousness by the time I reach her, her skin so translucently white that I can see the blue of her veins.

My vision starts to blur as I wrap her wrists in as much gauze as I can, followed by as many layers of duct tape from the roll I fished out of the toolbox.

It won’t save her.

But it damn well might buy her some time.

I use Seamus' blade to cut her down. I've got zero strength left as my own wound spills my lifeblood onto the floor. I use my body to break her fall, taking us both to the ground in a heap. I fumble, dizzy, losing my sight as I find a vein on my useless arm.

Then on hers.

We're both O-negative.

I stab one of the needles into my vein. The blood starts to flow out even before I twist on the rubber hose at the catheter end. I attach the other needle to the other end of the tubing before I sink it into her arm.

This has to work.

It fucking *has* to.

I drag myself next to her, both of us lying on our sides, face-to-face, surrounded by blood and death.

Wake up.

You have to fucking wake up.

You have to wake up because I love you.

Even if I don't wake up myself. When I glance at the gaping wound in my shoulder, I'm fairly sure I won't.

But that's okay. It's all okay if she lives.

My eyelids start to droop. The room begins to fade around me. I can feel my pulse getting weaker and weaker.

Wake up, love.

I force my eyes to stay open, gritting my teeth as I keep my gaze trained on her motionless eyes. Desperately looking for movement. Anything.

A fucking miracle.

The air feels cold. My pulse feels like syrup. My vision begins to darken.

And then suddenly.

Suddenly.

Neve's eyelids flicker.

They tremble, movement darting under them. And then slowly, her eyes open.

"*Ares*?"

I smile as my vision fades to gray.

It's okay.

She'll be okay.

"*I love you*."

The words slip from my parched lips as everything goes black.

She's going to be all right. That's all that matters now.

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NEVE

I CAN BARELY MOVE. Barely breathe.

The room spins dizzyingly, my vision cutting in and out as I cling to consciousness.

But I'm alive.

I'm alive.

Except right now, I'm not sure I even want to be.

"*Please…*"

The word croaks from my lips, ash from a dying fire. I can feel hot tears beading in my eyes, blurring them as I stare at him.

Ares is lying on the floor next to me, facing me. His eyes are closed, and I'm straining as hard as I can to see any possible sign of him breathing at all. Whenever I do catch the faintest movement of his lips, or the tiniest hint of a rise in his chest, my heart lurches.

He can't die.

He can't fucking die.

The room swims in and out again as I wince, using my last energy reserves to push my hand across the bloody floor towards him. Millimeter by millimeter, my fingers crawl sluggishly toward him. Finally, my knuckles brush his.

"*Ares…*"

My body is cold. My gaze drops to the needle in my arm, and the tube snaking across to Ares, where another needle is taking his blood and putting it into me.

I want to rip out. I want to stop this man from bleeding out his last drops of life for me. To save me.

I don't want to be saved if I leave him behind.

I strain. I strain so hard to reach for it with my other hand. But that one is still resting against his, and it just won't move.

I'm going cold. I think I might be dying.

I think *we* might be dying.

"*Ares…please…*"

The words are sheets of paper blowing in a gale.

"*Please wake up*."

His chest goes still.

It stays still.

"*Please*," I exhale, a tear trickling down my face. "*Please wake up. I love you…*"

He’s not moving. My heart begins to tear in half as my vision fades, then goes out. After that all I know is the touch of his knuckles to mine.

Then that disappears, too.

LIGHTS FLASH. Someone’s knocking on something. No, *breaking*. Hammering. Someone roars—screaming the words, whatever they are. The scream comes again, closer now, but still muffled, as if yelled through a pillow.

“*Neve*…”

The lights flash again, piercing the darkness around me for just a moment. I want to say something. I want to call for help and tell the voice that yes, I’m down here at the bottom of this darkness, but I can’t.

I can’t move. I can’t speak a word.

But suddenly I can feel Ares’ knuckles again, brushing mine.

“*Neve*!”

Someone’s calling my name. And then I have the sensation of being touched. Hands are on me, rolling me. My hand slips away from Ares’.

It feels like being ripped in half. I want to scream at the hands to help him. To leave me and help *him*. But no words come. It’s like I’m floating in a netherworld between underwater and dry land.

Or between life and death.

“*She’s here! Get him the fuck in here! GO!*”

More yelling. More hands touching me as something thuds to the ground beside me. Bright lights blare into my eyes. Someone's saying my name over and over.

"*Get her into the car!*"

"*We can't move her—*"

"*Get her into that fucking car or I'll rip your goddamn head off right here.*"

Hands grab me, lifting me. My head lolls to the side, and suddenly, I'm looking down at him—at Ares.

"*No...*"

I'm being carried away from him. He's just lying there, unmoving, looking so heart-wrenchingly pale.

Please don't take me away from him.

My vision starts to fade, then my eyes open once more, landing on him as he falls away from me. Then everything goes black.

And my heart truly breaks.

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ARES

THE DARKNESS CONSUMES ME. It surrounds me, filling my senses and carrying me deeper and deeper down, until it's all I know.

This is what crossing over feels like.

Part of me aches as her face swims into my mind's eye, then slowly recedes. I can feel myself sinking even deeper, knowing that even if I wanted to fight it I can't, not anymore.

Suddenly I feel a touch. A warmth. Skin, brushing the knuckles of my hand.

And the sinking sensation stops, as if this faint, feather touch is a lifeline snagged around my soul, holding me back. Keeping me somewhere between life and death.

Time passes. Seconds, minutes. Eons? I have no fucking idea. Time doesn't exist here in the void between being and not being. At a certain point, I hear sounds. Voices, maybe. Or just the ghosts and demons from my past hungering for me in Hell.

Waiting for me.

The muffled sound comes again, like a voice spoken across an ocean. Then the touch against my hand disappears. The lifeline snaps.

I sink untethered and weightless into the darkness.

Then it swallows me whole.

Beep.

Beep.

I flinch in the deep, dark abyss. A pinpoint of light pings in the darkness. Not even light. Just a faint, throbbing suggestion of light. Pulsing, like a blip on a radar screen, or a heartbeat—

My heartbeat.

Suddenly, it feels like I'm floating and rising out of the inky blackness.

Beep.

Beep.

The light flashes more frequently now. Brighter. And it begins to linger, like the sun slowly rising instead of just the tiny pricks of light piercing the darkness. Then, all at once, it's blindingly bright, making me flinch as air—real air—floods my lungs.

I'm fucking awake.

Chaos and panic sink their claws into me. I choke, my body going into panic mode when I realize there's something lodged in my throat.

"*Ares*!"

I can hear the voice calling my name. But I can't see shit except the blinding white light shining into my very soul. I snarl, choking as my hands

move towards my mouth. Well, one does. The other hurts like a motherfucker, and no matter what my brain tells it to do it remains motionless.

The hand the does make it to my mouth claws at the plastic tubing shoved down my throat.

"*Ares!! No!! Hades! Stop him!!*"

No. There's *nothing* that will stop me from getting this goddamn tube out of my throat. I groan, wincing at the pain as I yank the fucking thing free. I retch, twisting as the bile rises, and immediately hissing as pain lances through my ribs.

"*Ares! Stay the fuck down, broth—*"

I flail at the voice, throwing a wild punch that hits nothing. The light begins to bleed at the edges, dark shapes hovering in the white mist around me. I flail at the shapes again, before there's a soft grip on my wrist, pushing it back down.

"*You have to stop, Ares*."

I pause, my pulse racing and the beeps around me shrieking like an alarm.

I know that voice.

My eyes blink and my pulse thuds as the mist begins to clear. As the last remnants of purgatory, or limbo, wherever the fuck I just was, slip away from me.

Suddenly, I'm very much awake.

I blink, my breath catching as I look up into two familiar faces, lined with concern.

Hades, and the soft touch on my arm holding me down belongs to my sister. When I manage to focus on them both, relief floods their faces.

"*Holy fuck*, man…" Hades chokes.

Callie starts to cry, and I don't even mind the pain that stabs into me as she hugs me fiercely.

"*Where—*"

"You're in Allegheny General Hospital."

"*Where…*"

Hades frowns, like I'm being slow and not getting it.

"In Pittsburgh, man. The local clinic Cillian got you to choppered you over here as soon as—"

My lips curl as my good hand reaches up and claws at his arm, yanking him closer.

"*Where the fuck is Neve*."

Hades glances at my sister.

"*WHERE THE FUCK—*"

"She's here, Ares!" Callie nods quickly, taking my hand in hers. "She's here, too. She's recovering."

My heart leaps. The machine next to me pings crazily like a fucking Geiger counter at Chernobyl. My eyes dart side to side, and for the first time I see the vast array of tubes, wires, sensors, and other shit connecting me to the stack of machines next to my bed.

“She was in really bad shape when you were flown in,” Callie chokes. “You both were. I…we…”

She chokes as the tears flood her face.

“We thought you were dead,” Hades murmurs quietly, his face grim as he drops a hand to my good shoulder.

My jaw clenches as my eyes lock with his.

“Where is she?”

He frowns. “Resting. The doctors say she’s going to be—*Ares*!”

He moves to stop me as I start to sit up in the bed. Fuck. Everything hurts. A lot. My abdomen feels like it got run over by a tank. And my arm…I frown when I turn to really look at it.

Fuck, that’s not good.

I blink, struggling to take in all the bandages, tubes, IV drips, and the cage-like device keeping my left shoulder and arm immobile. I’m clearly on a fuckload of painkillers. Even so, when I try and flex my shoulder, the agony is almost overwhelming.

“Ares, *stop*, man!” Hades hisses, trying to get me to lie back down. “In case you forgot, that fucking maniac shot you.”

“No, he didn’t.”

I shove his hands away, shutting out the searing pain that almost makes me throw up. I swing my legs over the edge of the bed, ignoring my siblings as they scream at me.

“Fucking *stop*, man!” Hades hisses, trying to uncurl my fingers from the side of the bed.

“Ares! Please!” Callie blurts, trying to pull me back.

I shake them both off with a fierce snarl.

“I am *going* to my fucking wife,” I hiss, my gaze stabbing into them both. “You can let me crawl there and maybe bleed out on the way. Or you can fucking help. Either way, I’m getting out of this goddamn bed.”

Callie glares at me, her lips tight.

Hades sighs heavily. “*Such* a fucking stubborn dickhead,” he grunts. “Fine.”

“Hades…”

He glances at our sister.

“Hey, if you want to physically restrain him, be my guest.”

She glares at the two of us before finally gritting her teeth.

“*Goddammit.*”

They’re both clearly not happy about it, but they do help me to stand. The room spins. The machine behind me starts having a shitfit before I grab the tubes, IVs, and sensors attached to my body and stuck into my veins and start to rip them off. No fucking way am I going to let Neve see me with all these tubes in me.

“*Jesus*, Ares…” Hades mutters as the machines behind me have a collective aneurism and then fall silent.

I swallow.

“Let’s go.”

Slowly, painfully, I half-walk, half-drag myself from the room and down the hall.

“*Ares*…”

I turn at the fresh concern in Callie’s voice. I glance at my wound, and see the blood seeping through the bandages over it.

Shit.

“Keep going,” I growl.

We keep going.

“Hey, what did you mean ‘no, he didn’t’?” Hades glances sidelong at me as I shuffle past a horrified-looking patient on crutches. “Seamus shot—”

“He didn’t shoot me,” I grunt. “I shot me.”

Hade’ faces pales as he stares at me.

“*What*?”

I groan. “Just fucking get me to—”

“Mr. Drakos!” A stunned orderly steps in front of us, waving his hands and shaking his head violently. “What the hell are you doing!?” His eyes snap to my two siblings. “Are you two *out of your minds?!* He needs to be lying down in bed!”

“*Move*,” I snarl.

“Mr. Drakos! Your wound is reopening—”

He goes to stop me. Hades throws an arm out.

“I’d think twice about trying to talk him down right now.”

The orderly looks between Hades and me. “You need—”

“I *need* to see my wife. And you’d better have a fucking army hidden up your ass if you want to change that.” I turn to Callie and Hades. “Let’s go.”

We shove past the orderly, who’s still screaming at me. I ignore him as my siblings lead me around the corner and to another room. Hades swings the door open, and my heart climbs into my throat when I see her.

“*Ares*!”

I ignore my sister’s cry as I yank myself free of both of them and half-run, half-fall across the room until I crash into the side of Neve’s bed. Her eyes flutter open, and her whole face instantly crumples as her gaze finds mine.

“*Ares*…”

She sobs as I clutch her to me, holding her tight, like I’m never going to let her fucking go. I kiss her forehead and her hair as she cries into my chest and clings to me.

“*I love you*,” I hiss into her hair. “*I love you, I love you, I love you*…”

“*I love you too*.”

I love her.

I’m also losing consciousness.

The lights fade, and suddenly I’m slumping into her as it all goes black again.

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“HEY, ARES, HOW ARE YOU DOI…” Hades trails off when I don’t respond. I can hear him moving quickly to my side. His hand lands on my good arm, shaking me slightly.

“Ares?”

I don’t respond. I keep my eyes shut, practically biting my tongue off to keep quiet.

Hades shakes me again. “*Ares*!”

I still don’t move.

“ARES!”

Panic erupts in his voice.

“NURSE!!” He roars. “NUR—!”

I snort. He whirls back, his face white with terror. Then his eyes suddenly narrow as it clicks.

“You absolute fucking *shithead*,” he snarls as I grin at him. “No. No way, man,” he glares at me. “No, fuck you, that’s not cool, that’ not even one bit fucking funny.”

“It’s a *little* bit funny.”

He glares daggers at me. “You’re an asshole.”

“Okay, maybe. Sorry. Too bad, you don’t get the throne after all.”

He rolls his eyes. “If it’s ever *me* sitting at the top, we’re all fucked anyway, so just shoot me.” He snickers. “Maybe just don’t do it *through your own fucking body* this time, you goddamn psycho. What were you thinking?”

“You mean that’s not how you’re supposed to do it?”

“As if that would matter to you.”

I grin at him. He just shakes his head and grins back.

It’s been two weeks since I first woke up. That first week, I was at Allegheny General Hospital in Pittsburgh. They say it was pretty touch and go for a while. First, when they brought me in with a hole through my chest and I had lost just shy of half my blood. Then, when I woke up and demanded to see Neve, which ended up with me ripping my stitches out, causing a massive internal hemorrhage and *royally* pissing off the team of doctors who’d spent nineteen hours in surgery carefully patching me up the first time.

I also managed to pick up an infection from God-knows-what was all over that grimy floor of the cabin.

But now I’m getting better, and I’m back in New York. We both are, though Neve was discharged about a week ago.

The door swings open behind my brother. Instantly, a grin spreads over my face when my eyes lock with my wife’s. She was at my side almost every single minute when we were both healing. I mean literally at my side. She

wouldn’t let them move me back to my own hospital room for anything, be it kind suggestions or outright demands.

She simply wouldn’t.

Eventually—in part due as well to Cillian’s chilling, psycho look shutting down any possible pushback, I think—they ended up just moving another bed into her room and pushing them next to each other.

Since we got back to New York and she was discharged, she’s still been with me almost every minute of every day.

Neve’s hand finds mine as she leans against the bed. I groan as I pull her down, my lips searing to hers and locking in place there.

“Jesus, get a fucking room.”

I glare at my brother. “I *do* have a room. You’re in it, that’s all. Feel free to change that any time, by the way.”

Hades chuckles, shaking his head. Neve grins at me.

“Cillian’s just outside with Agent Dorsey.” Her brow furrows with concern. “Only if you’re ready, that is.”

“I’m ready. Let’s do it.”

A large part of me would like to pretend that everything that happened back at that cabin was a nightmare. That I invented it, and then woke back up to reality.

I’m sure a shrink would say that’s PTSD talking.

But it did happen. And now, it’s over. Or at least, it’ll *be* over once I talk with Shane Dorsey, give him an official statement he can take back to his higher-ups, and close the books on this whole thing for good.

Neve smiles, leaning down to kiss me softly. My hand entwines with hers, my fingers brushing the edges of the bandages on her wrists.

She'll have scars, but they'll fade. She'll have the trauma of what happened to us both. But that will fade too, and I'll be there, every minute of every day, to keep her moving forward. To hold her close if the terror ever grips her.

She's going to be okay.

We're both going to be okay.

They're releasing me today, probably right after I talk with Dorsey, which is one reason I'm eager to get the interview over with. I'll still need plenty of bed rest back home, and the cast and brace on my shoulder will stay there while my broken collarbone and torn ligaments heal. But I'll get there.

I mean, I doubt I'll ever become a left-handed star quarterback for the NFL now. But that's their loss.

Neve smiles, nuzzling my face and kissing me again before she pulls away. She walks to the door and pokes her head out. A second later, she turns back to me as her uncle, Shane Dorsey and Castle file in behind her.

Cillian nods at me.

Castle arches a brow. "Oh good, you look a little less like shit today."

"Stop it, you'll make me cry."

He grins.

Cillian's the one who got to us first. Well, him and Castle together. And not a second too soon, either. They had a doctor with them who was sure if they moved Neve and I, we'd never make it. But I'm pretty sure the odds were in the toilet whether we stayed in the cabin or risked racing to a local hospital.

In the end, it would seem fortune favored the brave.

Of course, it's not just luck or fortune I have to thank, or Cillian's timing in getting to us. I was very close to dead when they got there: no pulse, blue lips, the whole nine yards.

But luckily, Neve and I aren't the only ones with type O-negative blood.

Castle does, too. And that's who I really owe my life to. That big asshole carried me out of the cabin, dumped me into the passenger seat of the car, and gave me a transfusion from his own veins *while he drove us* to the local hospital.

That's the only reason I'm still here.

When he steps into the room, it's the first time I've seen him since I've woken up. Before I can say anything, he shakes his head.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

Castle shrugs. "You don't thank family."

Neve squeezes my hand as Cillian walks over to me.

"You ready to do this?"

Not really. But I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

"Sure."

His eyes hold mine. "Despite Castle's poetic words," he growls quietly, "thank you for doing what you did for her."

I nod. "Same to you."

His lips curl into a normalish grin, at least as normal as it gets for Cillian.

Dorsey clears his throat. “Well, should we do this?”

“Let’s.”

HALF AN HOUR LATER, between myself, Cillian, Neve, Castle, and Shane we’ve hammered out a pretty fantastic “official” statement. One that leaves in everything it should, but leaves out anything that might hurt us.

The part about Neve being blackmailed with those pictures, for instance, is left out. Unfortunately, so is the part where Owen Foley betrayed us all for a shot at power.

But that doesn’t really matter anymore. Owen’s dead, and the only thing leaving that tidbit in would do is shine a light on the Kildare family in ways none of us want, or need.

So my official statement is that Owen was just another victim of Seamus’ random unhinged violence. As it turns out, the FBI is more than happy to minimize the fallout and public knowledge of any collateral damage from O’Conor’s escape.

Oh, and the official statement has *Dorsey* as the shooter who put Seamus down.

Dorsey gets a pay and title bump for that, the Drakos and Kildare families get another pass and probably even better FBI perks with his new position, and the Bureau gets to boast about taking down a crazy serial killer.

Nice, neat, and everyone goes home happy.

“Well, that’ll do it, then.”

Dorsey stands and shakes my good hand.

“Hell of a shot, by the way,” he grins at me.

When he’s gone, Cillian shuts the door and turns to me. “There’s something else you should know.”

Jesus, really?

“About how we got to you, I mean.”

That’s certainly something I’ve been wondering about. But in the chaos of the last two weeks, where I’ve mostly just been focused on Neve, I let it fade.

Cillian clears his throat. “Let’s just say that if you’re in the habit of passing out Christmas bonuses, you might want to set a big one aside for Mr. Adamos.”

My brows arch incredulously. “*Ezio*?”

He nods. “Turns out he’s been trying to crack the passcode on his son’s old phone. He finally succeeded about two weeks ago, and found an audio file on it.” Cillian’s eyes narrow. “It’s a recording of the meeting where my brother Declan and your uncle Vasilis died, as well as Ezio’s son.”

I frown. Neve’s fingers lace through mine, squeezing, and she stares at her uncle with a look that says she hasn’t heard this yet either.

“They had a truce on the table. And then Owen walked in, made a bad joke, and shot them all—Declan, his lieutenant Eamon, Vasilis, and Ezio’s son, Jason.”

Holy shit.

Cillian shakes his head, his eyes fierce. “I knew Owen for damn near my entire life. He was hiding his real self the whole time. He held that fucking grudge about my half-brother being made a Kildare and taking over New

York for *decades*. And that was his plan: fuck up the truce, create a war, wait for the bodies to drop—maybe help with that—and then take over the throne. The scumbag even had a proposal already drafted and ready to submit to the Council—a petition for him to take over as head of Irish operations in New York."

My grip tightens on Neve's hand.

"But when war was avoided by you two marrying," Cillian goes on, "Owen changed tactics. He used some men he had on the inside of Florence, as well as some paid Russian muscle, to break Seamus out."

My eyes narrow. "Russian? As in Bratva?"

Cillian's face is grim, but he says nothing.

"I'm looking into it," Castle growls. "If it ends up pointing that way, we'll be paying a little visit to Gavan Tsarenko."

Fuck. As powerful as the Kildare and Drakos alliance is, the idea of getting into a tussle with the head of the New York operations for the Reznikov Bratva isn't exactly appealing.

Well, we'll cross that bridge if and when we have to.

"Anyway," Cillian growls, slipping a cigarette between his lips but for once not lighting it as he folds his arms over his chest. "Ezio heard that audio and started tailing Owen nonstop, looking to make an iron-clad case before he brought it either to you or I. When he saw Owen stuff your unconscious ass into the back of a car, he reached out to me."

Shit.

And I almost threw the guy off a roof.

I make a note to call the head of the Adamos family and settle all of this once and for all, not to mention express my deepest gratitude, the minute I get out of here.

Well, not *the minute*.

First, broken collarbone and gun wound to the shoulder or not, I'm taking my wife home to our bed, ripping her clothes off, and fucking *feasting* on her.

The doctors come in once more to remind me for the millionth time about taking my meds and doing my PT and all that bullshit. And after all that, I'm gone…walking right out the front door—with the help of the woman I love.

The one I almost lost.

The one I'll never let go of.

Outside the hospital Eilish, Callie, Hades, Kratos—even Deimos, who's flown in from London—are waiting for me, alongside Ya-ya, of course. There are hugs all around, and tears, and laughter. And I watch it all from almost outside my body, like an observer watching the impossible happen: rivals who turned into allies.

Enemies who became family.

And there, surrounded by that blended family, I turn to my wife. I grin as her lips curve up at the corners. My good hand cups her face as my eyes lock with hers.

I tell her I love her, and it's the truest thing I've ever said.

She tells me she loves me too.

Our lips come together, and the world melts away. The sun shines down.

And it’s a brand new day.

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EPILOGUE

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NEVE

One month later:

"I'M SORRY, *WHAT*?"

Callie sighs into the phone. "Why does everyone keep reacting that way? Eilish and Kratos said exactly the same thing when I told them."

Sitting in the lounge chair out on the penthouse balcony, I shake my head, looking out over the lights twinkling across the West Side.

"Because it's a *little* crazy."

"What? Why?"

I grin. "Callie, you can't even legally drink in a bar yet, and you're talking about buying one?"

"No one in my family can fly a fucking *plane*, either, but we own a private jet."

I roll my eyes. "Callie…"

"*Neve*," she mimics my tone.

I shake my head, grinning even more widely at her confidence and conviction.

“You seriously want to buy The Banshee.”

“No, it’s all an elaborate and badly thought-out joke.” She sighs. “*Yes*, I seriously want to buy The Banshee. Why is that so hard for everyone to come to grips with?”

I’ve heard through the grapevine that owners of the Irish bar want to sell. I guess they were already at the end of their rope with the place. And when their head bartender turned up dead after a drug deal gone wrong…

Oh. Yeah. That’s another part of the truth that got swept under the rug a month ago. It would have been easy enough to tell the truth—that Seamus O’Conor murdered Mike Jennings, Councilman Greg Leery, and a bartender named Jack Phillips. But that would have put me at the scene, too.

And *that* would have raised questions about why I was there, which would have led to *more* questions about Ares beating the shit out of two of the three dead men not so long ago. Not to mention the photographs.

In the end, Ares decided no part of that—especially the part where my name and any vicious rumors about me could very well get dragged into the press—ever needed to come to light.

So the crime scene was doctored to make it look like a drug deal gone bad, like Mike and Greg were trying to buy coke from Jack, but then things went south when Jack’s “business partner” decided to take the drugs and the cash for himself, shooting the other three in process.

That “business partner”—who obviously doesn’t exist—is still at large, and a person of *extreme* interest to the NYPD.

I wish them the very best of luck in their search for him.

Anyway, yes—the owners of The Banshee are now very keen to sell. And it would seem my sister-in-law is looking to buy.

“Look, the price is reasonable, and the place needs virtually zero money put into it. I mean it’s turn-key ready.”

I laugh quietly. “Callie, what do you know about Irish bars?”

“Enough?” she mutters. “Not as much as you, I’ll grant.” She clears her throat. “Which is why I want you to be my business partner in it.”

The smile drops from my mouth. My eyes widen.

“I’m sorry, *what*?”

“Give me one good reason why the fuck not.”

I snort. “Because it’s fucking crazy?”

“Umm, you fake-married my brother to stop a mafia feud. You sure you want to start talking about crazy ideas?”

I grin, shaking my head.

“Okay, how about because I’ve got another semester of grad school left?”

“I’m not asking you to sling *drinks*. I just want your smarts.”

“Callie, Eilish is the business-minded one.”

“Oh, I know. That’s why I already asked her.”

“Well, her saying no should be a pretty good indication that maybe this isn’t the best—”

“Yeah, but…” Callie clears her throat. “She didn’t say no.”

My brows arch. “Eilish is in?”

I can hear my sister-in-law grinning through the phone.

“*Yup*.”

Shit.

It’s a fucking insane idea. It’s reckless, and ill-planned, and ridiculous.

It also sounds fun as *hell*.

I startle when the glass door to the patio behind me slides open. I turn, grinning when I see Ares step out. He nods questioningly to the phone. I cover it with my hand and mouth “*Callie*”.

“You’re at least thinking about it, aren’t you?”

I laugh. “Let’s just say it’s making the rounds in my head.”

“*What does she want?*” Ares murmurs, coming up behind me and kissing my neck. I shiver, melting into him as I always do, feeling my pulse thud before I slip away. I grin at him when he scowls and hold up a finger.

“Say yes. *Please?*”

“Callieee…”

“C’mon, Neve! You, me, and Eilish? We’d be amazing at it!”

“Or a train wreck.”

“Only one way to find out.”

I chew on my lip.

“Say *yessss*…”

“Let me think about it. Like for real think about it, maybe overnight?”

“Okay, okay, fine. Lunch tomorrow? Eilish has a business plan all drafted up that we were going to show you when you inevitably waffled on this.”

I roll my eyes. “I am not *waffling*. I just want to think it through.”

“Fine, fine, okay. Lunch at one at Maison Premiere tomorrow?”

“Deal.”

Callie squeals. “You’re not going to regret this. I’m so psyched!”

“Callie, I said I’d *think* about—”

“Yeah-yeah-yeah, of course. Okay, byeee.”

She hangs up. I do too, shaking my head and grinning as I turn back to Ares.

“What the heck was that about?”

“Callie wants to buy The Banshee with me and Eilish.”

He just stares at me.

“Crazy, right?”

Ares rakes his fingers down his jaw thoughtfully.

“I mean…” he shrugs. “It’s not the *craziest* idea in the history of the world.”

I gape at him curiously.

“You actually think it’s a smart idea for Eilish, your sister and me to own a freaking Irish bar?”

“I think you’ve got the know-how and temperament to deal with the liquor board and any other city agencies. I think Eilish has the business mind for

handling the back end of things. And I think Callie is a fucking firecracker ready to blow, and this honestly sounds like a weirdly constructive outlet for her. Plus, I think she'd be a great bar owner. Or at least a sassy enough one."

He grins at the gobsmacked look on my face.

"So, yeah. I mean, if the numbers work and the price is right. And of course, if it's something you actually want to do. Then yeah, I could see it."

He moves close to me. His left arm is still in a sling, which he *hates*. But the doctors and his physical therapist say he's making huge strides in healing, and he's got just about full motion of his shoulder back.

Sometimes, the idea that this man *shot himself* in order to save my life is absolutely bonkers for me to even comprehend.

It's also frequently an *insane* turn on.

My pulse thuds as he steps closer to me, his hand brushing a lock of hair away from my neck before his lips descend to kiss the tender skin there.

Yeah, *now* would be one of those turn-on times.

My thighs squeeze together as I grip his shirt and pull him against me—needing more. Needing him. Needing all of him.

Ares groans. "We do have dinner at Dimitra's in, like, twenty minutes."

I start to unbutton his shirt. A low growl rumbles in his chest, and I shiver as his good hand slides around my hip to cup my ass.

"Well," I purr, kissing around his chest as I slowly open his shirt. "Dimitra *does* enjoy going on about falling in love and having lots of babies."

My hand slides down to his pants, and I shiver.

He’s so fucking hard.

And I’m so fucking wet.

“Babies, hmm?” he murmurs, taking my breath away as he yanks my skirt up. His hand slips into my panties, making me whimper as he peels them down to my knees.

“*Uh-huh…*”

I moan when his pants drop and his thick cock springs free into my eager hands. He sinks down onto the lounge chair, pulling me astride his hips as his lips brush mine.

“Never hurts to practice.”

“*Exactly*,” I whimper as I guide his cock to my eager, wet pussy and sink down onto him.

Needless to say, we’re late for dinner.

The Dark Hearts series continues with Cillian’s story in *Vicious Hearts*.

Haven’t gotten enough of Ares and Neve?
Get their extra scene here, or type this link into your browser:
https://BookHip.com/QHRLTPC

This isn’t an epilogue or continuation to *Deviant Hearts.* But this extra hot “follow-up” story is guaranteed to keep the steam going.

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DARK KINGDOM

Thank you so much for reading *Deviant Hearts*! If you enjoyed the book, I'd be incredibly grateful if you could leave a review!

As mentioned, the Dark Hearts series continues with Cillian's story in *Vicious Hearts*. You can also get a glimpse of a much younger Cillian in *Dark Kingdom*, another dark enemies-to-lovers mafia romance, and book one of the Kings and Villains series. There's even a sneak peek of that book on the following pages for you.

You can find complete book lists and suggested reading orders on my website.
www.jaggercolewrites.com

Scroll on for a sneak peek of *Dark Kingdom*.

Prologue
Adrian

Four Years Ago, Ascot, England:

Rain and fog shroud the cemetery, as if nature herself has dressed for the funeral today.

I look down numbly into the open coffin that cradles my father's body. It's dressed in a slate gray suit he never could have afforded when he was alive. Or at least never would have spent the money on, even if he'd had it.

Words like "alone" and "orphan" thud dully inside my head. First my mother, when I was four, and now my father, a month after my twentieth birthday. Her from the blunt violence of gunfire, him from the creeping assassin of cancer.

The priest finishes his words, and silence falls over the meager crowd of mourners. It's just me, the housekeeper of the family and estate my father worked for Mrs. Dubois, the groundskeeper Mr. Peddleton, and Chris, my father's friend and darts partner from down at The Spotted Hen.

A firm hand lands gently on my shoulder.

And my uncle, Jonathan. My father would have been enraged to know his brother was attending his funeral. But, you know, it *is* his funeral.

Sort of hard to protest the guest list.

I glance down at my watch—the one that Jonathan gifted me last night as we sat at the bar at The Spotted Hen over scotch. He and my father might not have spoken in sixteen years. The history between them might be the reason my father severed all ties with the rest of the Cross family and moved us away from Manchester for the job here in Ascot working for Jean Margaux.

But Henry Cross was still Jonathan's brother. And even a man as dangerous, connected, and powerful as my uncle can still feel grief.

My eyes drop to the watch again before I lift my head a little and turn to peer through the rain, looking for someone else that I was hoping would be here. Someone I wish was here by my side right now above anyone else, even Jonathan. Someone I didn't ask to be here because, well, who knows why.

Ah, yes. Because I'm the "emotionally stunted son raised alone by an emotionally stunted father", as she likes to tell me with that sly grin of hers that sends me reeling and takes the wind out of my lungs. Because I know it comes from a place of humor, and love.

And love.

A love that was…one thing, and is now, as of two weeks ago, very much another.

Despite the rain and the fog, and Mrs. Dubois crying quietly beneath her black veil, and the body of my father lying before me ready to be put into the ground, I smile. It's not because I'm a psychopath. It's because when Celeste dances into my head, I become helpless. When I even imagine that smile, it's the only physical motion I'm capable of making, like my heart is too full to do anything but grin.

But she's not here.

I know deep down that's probably a good thing. If Mr. Margaux, the powerful and connected Frenchman who employed my father for the last sixteen years, isn't here for Henry's burial, his daughter being here might raise…questions.

Those questions might escalate if she were standing next to me, holding my hand. Which she would be, if she were here.

Questions along the lines of “why is Jean Margaux’s youngest daughter wrapped in the arms of her father’s chauffeur’s son?” The boy with nothing to offer but grease-stained hands and a dangerous last name. The pauper with his hands on the gilded elite French princess.

There wouldn’t just be questions. Answers would be demanded.

Celeste and I had always been close, to a point. Friends, to a certain degree, raised basically under the same roof—her a resident, and me the son of the help. But I think both of us always knew the truth, or knew it since we were old enough to realize what it meant:

Celeste Margaux and I were only ever “friends” because calling it more or pushing it any further would be dangerous. Because of her father. Because of the family my father came from, even if he spent the last sixteen years pretending otherwise.

And then two months ago, a week after her eighteenth birthday and two after my twentieth, we stopped being “friends”.

A single kiss more than decade in the making burned that façade to the ground, finally letting us both see what had always really been there underneath. And after that single kiss, there was no going back.

My blood hums against the chill in the air as my mind replays all the stolen moments over the last fourteen days. Gasped kisses in the pantry of the huge Margaux estate while Mrs. Dubois is busy in the kitchen. Celeste’s teeth biting down on my neck, trying not to scream as my fingers down the front of her panties drive her over the edge behind the garage.

Her body feverishly grinding to mine, our skin slick against skin, our mouths devouring each other in the gardens before dawn.

The smile plays across my lips once again as I lift my eyes to scan the road by the cemetery. She's not here. My smile fades, but I nod to myself.

She can't be here. We both know that would raise too many questions.

"You know you can't let her be a part of your decision, Adrian."

I tense and slowly turn to glance back at my uncle. My father, when he *did* bring up his brother, always framed him as a savage criminal. A bloodthirsty, reckless force of chaos rampaging across Britain.

The man who stares back at me, the man I've come to know again over the last two terrible days, is anything but reckless or chaotic. Dangerous, of course. But one doesn't become—much less stay—the head of the Cross organization by being reckless. My uncle is a coldly calculating, highly intelligent man.

And now he wants me to sit at his side and learn the ways of the empire that bears my name. My father kept me from that world. But I know it's in my blood. I *know* that's where my destiny lies.

So therein lies the dilemma: stay here in Ascot, and step into my father's shoes working for Jean Margaux. Be a chauffeur and personal mechanic to the ill-tempered, coldly dismissive French businessman. Or step into the shoes I was born to step into, and learn how to sit at the head of the Cross family table one day, after the mantle passes from Jonathan to me.

That should be an abundantly easy choice to make. Stay in the house of a man I dislike as his servant, or seek the throne of power, wealth, and limitless possibilities at my uncle's side? But of course, it's not an easy choice to make at all.

Not when all my mouth ever wants to taste is Celeste's lips.

"Adrian—"

“*I know*,” I growl quietly.

Jonathan nods slowly. I can see in his eyes that he understands what’s going through my head. Not just sees it, but gets it, too. I never told him about Celeste, but he guessed all on his own and spoke to me about it last night at the pub when he gave me the watch.

There’s a possible middle ground here, though. Since my father and I left Manchester, the Cross Family seat of operations has moved to London. And Celeste has every intention of attending Kings College, also in London, beginning with the fall term.

We can finally stop sneaking around. In a few short months, we can *be together.*

So it’s okay if she can’t be here today.

I turn back to the coffin, staring numbly at my father’s body as Mrs. Dubois sobs beside it. Chris, my father’s pub friend, shakes my hand solemnly and then turns to pay his last respects to my dad. He lays three feathered darts on my father’s chest, patting them with a soft hand.

The sound of car tires on gravel has my heart jumping into my throat. I turn, and there’s no stopping the grin spreading across my face as I recognize the Margaux family’s black and silver Bentley rolling to a stop on the white stone drive a dozen yards away.

My heart surges. She came.

I pull away from my uncle and walk quickly through the drizzling rain, *sans* umbrella, towards the girl I’ve loved since I was old enough to understand what that really means. The tinted back windows roll down as I approach, grin on my face—

“Mr. Cross.”

My smile shatters, and my heart falters as the grim, lined, aristocratic and distinctively French face of Jean Margaux, not Celeste, greets me from inside the dark car. I stutter to a stop, at a loss for words.

“Mr. Margaux, I wasn’t expecting—”

“You father was a loyal employee, Mr. Cross,” he says tersely. “He shall be missed.”

I swallow, nodding.

“Thank you, Mr. Marg—”

“I’m fully aware of who you *were* expecting,” he hisses quietly.

I stiffen. His eyes narrow, and his lips curl slightly.

“You were expecting a prettier face, no doubt.”

“Mr. Margaux—”

“I’m going to say this to you one time and one time only, you little asshole,” he snarls.

My eyes drop to his hand that is tightly clasping the diamond hilt of his cane between his knees. I suddenly realize he’s not alone. There’s a burly man in a black suit sitting next to him in the back seat of the car. And instead of a cane, this man’s hands are wrapped around the stock of an enormous, gleaming Glock 17.

“Stay the fuck away from my daughter.”

My eyes snap to his. But I don’t flinch. I don’t quail from this man, or fumble apologies, or beg for his forgiveness. I stare him right back in the eyes.

It’s not something a man like Jean Margaux is used to, and I can see it filling his eyes with anger.

“Sir,” I mutter back. “All due respect—”

“Respect, Adrian,” he snaps, “would have been keeping your filthy hands off of my Celeste in the first place.”

“*Respectfully*, sir,” I growl back, “I love—”

He barks a cold, brutal laugh.

“Ahh, *c’est l’amour*, is it?” He smiles cruelly, sneering at me.

“*Yes*.”

He snorts.

“Sir, you can’t tell me to stay away from—”

“You think this is *my* order? That I am here simply to be cruel to you on this day of mourning?”

My eyes narrow.

“Yes, I do.”

He shakes his head.

“*Non*, Adrian. While these may also be *my* wishes, this request doesn’t come from me.”

He smiles triumphantly.

“This is what *Celeste* wishes.”

My heart thuds and my mouth thins to a line as I glare at him.

“Thank you for coming, Mr. Margaux,” I grunt. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to—”

“You’re the proverbial *other man*, Adrian.”

I freeze as his words hit me like a slap. Jean just grins at me.

“You were a fling, boy. A dalliance with ‘the help’. With the filth,” he sneers. “She’s not here because *you mean nothing to her*. She’s busy getting on with her real life.”

His smile widens.

“Getting ready for her big day tomorrow.”

He’s baiting me. But even as I hold myself back from asking what the bloody fuck he’s talking about, I can tell he sees that’s getting to me. Cracking me. Breaking me.

“Ask me,” he hisses thinly. “*Ask me*, you little bastard.”

I swallow.

“What the fuck is tomorrow?”

His teeth flash.

“Her wedding day, Adrian. She’s getting married.”

I stare. I want to see the lie in his eyes. I want to see it slipping out of the cracks in his cruel mask. But, the harder I stare, the more brightly the truth burns.

He’s not lying.

“Here. See for yourself.”

One of the hands on his cane drops beneath the window. It comes back holding a delicate cream card with gold calligraphy across it. I pluck it from his hand and stare at the words mocking me, inviting me to celebrate the marriage between Celeste Meline Margaux and a certain Amir El-Sayed.

Tomorrow.

Rain blurs the golden lettering and starts to melt the delicate card in my hands. I let it drop to a puddle at my feet as Jean begins to laugh.

“You were *never* the end game, Adrian. Ever.” His eyes glint at me dangerously.

“Now fuck off to your world of petty crime and nothingness. To your insignificant, miserable life, without her in it. You and your father’s belongings will be waiting for you at the gates to my home. After that, if I ever see you again…” He turns to nod at the silent man with the hand cannon next to him.

“I’ll have someone blow your head off.”

His eyes dart past me to the small gathering by the open grave.

“Now please tell Mrs. Dubois and Peddleton to return to their jobs immediately, if they’d like to be employed tomorrow.”

He shifts his eyes back to me and smiles thinly.

“Fuck off and fly away, little boy.”

The tinted window rolls back up and the car glides away, sending up wet gravel and mud that splatters my shoes and shins.

But I don’t feel it. I don’t feel anything as my heart begins to calcify, turning to stone inside of my chest.

“You’re the other man. A fling. A dalliance. You were never the end game.”

My lips curl into a snarl as I drop my eyes to the soggy invitation, welcoming me to *celebrate* the eternal bond of the girl I love to some other man.

My heel slams into it, crushing it to a wet pulp before I turn and walk in a daze back towards the hole in the ground holding the man who raised me, and the man standing beside it who will guide me into the next phase of my life.

Without her.

Jean Margaux may think he took a win today. But he’s wrong. My life will not be insignificant. It will not be petty.

I am destined to be a *king*.

And one day, he, like everyone, will bow to me.

Chapter 1
Adrian

Four years later, London:

I grunt as the alarm drags me from sleep. My brow furrows, and the tinge of a hangover starts to bite into me as my body wakes.

Christ, I can still taste the scotch on my lips.

With a groan, I reach over and slam the alarm off. My fingers find and stab at the button for the automatic shades on my bedroom windows. Slowly, with a soft mechanical hum, the blackout shades roll up, letting the sunlight in.

My eyes squeeze shut, wincing. But I have things to do today. And there's no rest, as they say, for the wicked.

Or the hungover.

I fling the covers back and then roll out of bed directly onto my toes and fingertips on the hardwood floor. My muscles coil and flex as I push up and down, pumping out a set of pushups that gets my blood coursing through my veins, chasing away the lingering remnants of alcohol.

Heart racing, I instantly roll onto my back, gritting my teeth as I alternate elbows to knees, feeling my core clench with each crunch. When that fresh hell is done, I roll back over for another round of pushups, then flipping again for more brutal crunches. Lastly, it's rapid high-intensity dumb bells until my arms and shoulders scream.

But at least the hangover is fading.

I pad naked across the elegantly-wainscoted bedroom on the top floor of my three-story townhouse. I can faintly hear the new Velvet Guillotine record blasting from my kitchen, reminding me that Noel crashed here last night after our night of apparently bottomless scotch.

But for Christ's sake, the man needs to *stop* with that fucking album.

The shower is cold, which has me gritting my teeth and hissing. But it's what I need, and the hangover retreats further as I rinse off. I step out to shave quickly—with hot water, thank you very much. The silver straight razor gives me pause, and I allow myself ten seconds of melancholy, remembering the man who this once belonged to.

It's been six months since Jonathan passed—cruelly and ironically to the same pancreatic cancer that took his brother, my father. But in the two and a

half years he had me under his wing, I grew in ways I never imagined I could.

Now it's me who sits at the head of the Cross table. It's a delicate balancing act, considering I'm both the leader of a billion-dollar criminal enterprise as well as a student in my final year at Lords College graduate school of business.

There's a chance this tightly-wound balance is a contributing factor to my Thursday night scotch shenanigans.

I dress for the day quickly: dark charcoal gray suit, crisp white shirt, midnight blue tie and pocket square, dark brown shoes. By the time I'm heading down the stairs to the first-floor kitchen, my hangover is just about gone.

Velvet Guillotine's *Wreck Me Gently* seems to be on its fifth rotation of the morning as I step into the kitchen. Worse, Noel is bloody *singing along* to it in his goddamn boxers and t-shirt as he flips something on the stovetop, his back to me.

"This song? Again?"

He chuckles without turning.

"Bloody love this fucking record."

"Oh, do you?" I mutter dryly. "I'm not sure fucking Scotland is aware of that just yet, if you could maybe turn it up for them?"

Which he does. Wanker.

I groan and step past him and dialing the volume on the speaker it's blasting from.

"Is there coffee?"

“Oh, *yes*, but of *course*, m’lord!”

I roll my eyes as he turns to flip me off and nod at the pot.

“Hot and strong.”

“Lovely.”

The smell of sausages suddenly makes my stomach gurgle as I start to pour a mug of back coffee.

“Oi, speaking of Scotland…” Noel turns to give me a look that says he’s been wrestling with the same hangover his morning that I am. “How was your head this morning?”

“Vindictive,” I grunt. “Yours?”

“A bastard.” He sighs, shoving his fingers through his dark hair. “Thanks for letting me crash.”

“Any time.”

It made sense. We’d been drinking with friends at the Deluxe Lounge, which is a stone’s throw from my townhouse near campus but much further to Noel’s flat. Plus, I’m starting to recall the end of the evening over more scotch at my kitchen counter once we got here.

“Were we the last ones standing at Deluxe?”

My brows furrow, thinking. “Thomas and Cassandra left early, I remember that.”

“Well, there’s a shock.”

I grin. Our two good friends are newly engaged and newly pregnant, and still as perpetually entangled in each other’s arms as ever. Lately, it seems

when they come out, it's only to humor us, and only for as long as they can stand not being alone together.

"Lars was chatting up that redhead…" Noel frowns. "They may have left together?"

I give him a look. He grins.

"Right, as if that didn't happen."

I smirk at him. "Surprised you noticed."

"Hmm?"

"Seems there was something, or should I say someone, occupying your attention last night."

He glances at me. "Look, I was just—"

"Noel, I don't care if you're friends or, you know, whatever, with Matilde."

Maybe I should care. Maybe it should bother me more that somehow, Matilde Laurent, née *Margaux*—as in, the older sister of the girl who put a bullet through my heart out of fucking nowhere—has somehow become part of our little group here in London.

Maybe it *would* bother me more, if it wasn't for the fact that Celeste and her goddamn husband, *Amir*, have basically dropped off the face of the planet somewhere in Dubai.

With their fucking *daughter*.

I swallow the hatred that boils like molten lead in my chest, waiting for it to cool to the edged steel it always turns into.

Matilde knows enough to not mention her sister around me. But, from my own digging—and I *have* dug—Matilde has also barely been in contact

with her own sister for the last four years.

She's also smart enough not to mention her father around me. But there too it's the same thing. She and Jean haven't spoken in a year, since Paul, her husband at the time, ran off with our friend Oliver Prince's wife Vanessa. Apparently, Jean took that personally, and decided it was Matilde's fault that her shit-head husband wanted to stick his prick in another man's wife.

Jean Margaux: still the same son of a bitch four years on.

"Seems to be a good thing; she's coming out more often now."

"Good thing for you, you mean."

Noel glares at me. I shrug.

"She's a package deal, you know."

"Yes, Adrian, I'm aware that her children aren't an optional add-on."

"I'm just saying, 'step-father' has a nice ring—"

"Adrian?"

He turns to glare at me. "If you want this breakfast on a plate instead of shoved up your ass, shut the fuck up."

I grin into my coffee as he finishes with the bacon, sausages, beans, and fried eggs on the stove. Not quite a full English, but I'll take a half any day.

I'm not just giving him shit for the sake of giving him shit. Matilde Laurent *does* come with two small additions: three-year-old Naomi, and eight-month-old Cora—two more casualties of Paul and Vanessa's fling, along with Oliver's three-year-old son, Jacob.

Noel plates our food and then pauses, a scowl on his face.

“When did Prince fucking leave last night, anyway?”

I sigh. Noel and Oliver are seemingly perpetually in competition with each other over *something*. And most recently, that something seems to be Matilde, given how they were both vying for her attention last night before she slipped out early to relieve her nanny.

“Late.”

I eye him.

“*Much* later than her, relax.”

“I’m perfectly relaxed.”

I roll my eyes.

“And he went home. *His* home. He has a young son, remember?”

“I’m not sure I could forget, given how many times he mentioned it to Matilde last night.”

I shake my head as I shovel food into my mouth.

“They both got burned, Noel.”

“No, *she* got burned. Oliver Prince is a dumb, greedy prick who lost his wife because he only gives a shit about himself.”

I glare at him. “Do I need to lean on Thomas to make sure you two get into the ring soon?”

“Please do,” Noel chuckles, gulping down breakfast before his brow furrows. He glances back up at me.

“I *did* appropriately bust your balls last night about completely ignoring the blue-eyed blonde in the black dress who was all over you, right?”

“You did.”

“And again I say, why the fuck was I the one sleeping over at your house last night instead of her?”

Because I don’t want blonde hair and blue eyes. I want raven hair and emerald green ones.

“Because I know how good a breakfast you can make, Ransom.”

He snorts, shaking his head.

“Look, I know you’re wound pretty tight what with school, and the business. But, Christ, Adrian. How long has it been?”

I stiffen.

Noel chuckles. “I’m being fucking serious, you know. When’s the last time you allowed yourself some female comp—”

“I allow myself exactly as much female company as I want, Noel. But thank you for your interest in my bedroom activities, you fucking creep.”

He grunts, turning to sip his coffee and letting the subject drop.

Technically, it wasn’t a lie. I *do* in fact allow myself as much female company as I want. It’s just that the amount of female company that I want these days is none.

I simply don’t have that urge anymore.

The only girl I ever wanted cut my heart out, burned it, and stamped on the ashes in front of me four years ago. My celibacy since isn’t any sort of bloody torch I’m carrying for her.

It just…is what it is.

I glance at my watch—the same one Jonathan gifted me the night before my father's funeral—and frown.

"Fuck. I need to run."

"Mind if I use your shower to clean up here?"

I nod. "Sure. But if you wank off in my bloody shower, it's going to be war."

Noel sighs. "Adrian, please." He grins. "That's what your pillow-cases are for."

"Fuck you."

He smirks. "What's your morning like?"

"Advisor meeting with Professor Higgins."

The funny thing about being at business school here at Lords College is that it's only about twenty-five percent actual learning things. The rest is making connections and building relationships. And even in my world, that'll be handy. Handy, if not necessary.

The professors know that, too. I mean, Higgins isn't just some tweed-wearing schoolteacher. When he's not advising at Lords College, he's the Vice President of Rutger Capital, one of the largest, most aggressive hedge funds in the UK. He also knows *exactly* who and what I am. And he doesn't turn a blind eye and "not give a shit", but actually gives a shit precisely *because of* who and what I am.

Because the place where the gilded world of the elite and the dark world of crime meet is *money*. The marriage of sin. Higgins is my advisor because, one, he sees the business acumen in me, not just the hustler. And two, because he *also* sees the hustler. Rutger Capital knows full well there's

more than a pretty pound to be made doing off-the-books business with people like the Cross family.

“Don’t forget tonight.”

“I’ll be there.”

“You know it’s fight night?”

“Precisely why I’ll be there,” I grunt. “Let yourself out when you’re done. Cheers for breakfast.”

Then I’m out the door and heading across the street to the campus.

The “tonight” Noel is talking about is a meeting of the eight of us: myself, Noel, Thomas, Oliver, Braddock, Lars, Kristoff, and Maddox.

In the beginning, we were all mostly strangers—all first-year students here at Lords, with all manner of backgrounds. From wealth and privilege. From royal names and titles. But also from the streets and houses of crime—mafia, Bratva.

The common thread running through all of us was, and remains, Thomas. It was he who ended up being the lynchpin in this whole bizarre group that has somehow come to mostly call itself friends despite the different roads that led us here, and the different titles we bear.

It’s why he decided to name the group what he did. It was Thomas who said that in all of us, all eight of us, there are both kings and villains.

Yale University has the Skull and Crossbones. The University of Oxford has the absurdly pretentious-sounding Bullingdon Club. Lords College has us: the Kings and Villains.

The biggest difference between us and those other prats? You’ve heard of them.

You'll never hear of the Kings and Villains.

Secret society sounds…stupid. Fellowship, as Thomas likes to call it, sounds ridiculous, like we're playing some stupid fantasy game involving hobbits and elves or some shit.

To me, the group just…*is*. Eight men with their eyes on conquering the world, who found each other through various connections to one of their own.

We meet on Friday nights. And every third or fourth meeting, such as tonight, we have a fight night amongst ourselves. There's no deeper message or meaning to it. It's not because we've seen *Fight Club* too many times. It's not some fucking blood oath or bullshit like that. Like the group, it just…*is*. We box, one round at a time, winner fights winner, until there's only one left standing.

Normally, that last one standing is either Noel or Thomas. Noel, because his father was the relatively famous boxer Colin Ransom. Thomas, because despite his bookish accountant's appearance, he can fight like the bloody devil. *I* can fight. We all can. Braddock hits like a goddamn truck to the face, and Maddox is a fucking monster. Kristoff has almost certainly killed people with those hands of his. But Thomas, for all that he grew up privileged and gilded…he has one leg up.

He was trained to fight for *years* by Noel's famous father, when he was the Ashford family's personal trainer. That's how the two boys became friends, actually. It's also how—no disrespect intended—a guy like Noel, with the lack of money, influence, or power his family has, got into Lords College.

Because *Sir* Geoffrey Ashford, Thomas's father, took a shine to Noel right from the start. He always looked at him like a second son. Probably because his *actual* second son, James, Thomas's older brother, is a pretentious trust-

fund douchebag. James will do nothing with his life, and his father knows it. Thomas and Noel, however, like the rest of us, will conquer it.

I duck into the faculty offices just as it starts to drizzle outside. My mind ticks, trying to recall the fight schedule this evening.

I grimace.

Fuck, I'm fighting Kristoff tonight. I want to smirk, wondering if Thomas did that on purpose—pitting the two criminally-connected ones of the group against each other. Me, the lowlands gangster, and Kristoff, whose way to Lords College has been paved with blood money, courtesy of his employer, the Bratva-connected oligarch Boris Tsavakov.

I'm still trying to calculate the best plan of attack for dodging that Russian motherfucker's south paw, when Higgins opens his office door.

"Ah, Mr. Cross."

"Mr. Higgins."

He grins. Behind him, I can already see the paperwork he wanted to go over with me last week. It wasn't school related. It was *business* related.

"Shall we?"

"Absolutely."

Two hours and a very meaningful handshake later, I'm headed to my afternoon lecture. After that, I'm stepping outside again. It's raining again as the sun is going down. I mentally tick off the schedule for the evening:

Home, to change. Then dinner with Thomas at Chesterford's, our usual Friday night steak spot. And then to the Red Dragon pub, where we'll first have a pint and then head through to the private back room to which only we hold the keys.

Through there, it's down the stairs to the old sub-basement beneath the pub. And that's where kings and villains will collide for the evening.

The rain is coming down harder as I jog across campus back to my townhouse. My head is down, my eyes stabbing at the dreary darkness ahead of me to find the next streetlight around the corner. When suddenly something small, drenched, and gasping comes slamming into me.

I snarl, gripping the person by the arms, ready to shove them away—or fight them, if they insist upon it. When suddenly, we both stumble under a streetlight, and the glint of it on her dripping wet, stricken face takes the very ground out from under me.

It's *her*.

For the first time in four fucking years, I'm face-to-face with Celeste Margaux.

And time stands perfectly still.

I've thought of this moment. I've envisioned it in my head a thousand different ways. In some of those scenarios, I hurl her away, or snarl in her face for stabbing me through the heart from behind. In other versions, I grab her, never let her go, and crush my lips to hers until all she knows is my mouth.

My pain.

My vengeance, in carnal form.

But now that we're actually here, standing right in front of each other? Now that I've got her in my hands, literally, for the first time in *four fucking years*?

I don't know if I should choke her or kiss her.

Time stops around us. My steel-blue eyes stab into her swirling emeralds. My lips curl, still unsure if I'm going to sneer, or slam them against hers.

"You…"

"*Adrian.*" Her voice breaks, croaking as her eyes widen in fear. Her fingers grip my soaking wet dress shirt tightly, clinging to me desperately like I'm a life raft in a stormy sea.

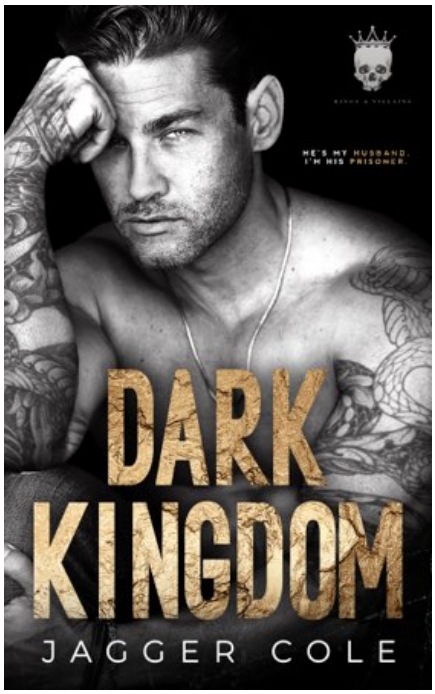
"What the *fuck* are you doing—"

"*I need your help.*"

She swallows, her face pale and her eyes impossibly wide as she holds onto me.

"Someone's trying to kill me, and I need your help."

Keep reading!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at
www.jaggercolewrites.com

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